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Notes on Contributors

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Fahri Öz is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Literature at DTCF (Faculty of Letters), Ankara University, Turkey, where he teaches poetry, poetic genres, literary history and translation. Among his translations into Turkish are works by Christina Rossetti, Jack London, Saki, William Burroughs and Bob Dylan. He co-authored and co-edited a collection of very short fiction in Turkish called *Hayat Kısa Proust Uzun*.

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Editor

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Introduction to the Issue

This is the fourth issue of the *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship* under my editorship, and it marks a significant expansion in the purview of the journal in line with the growth of IAFOR itself. IAFOR now holds dedicated Arts & Humanities conferences in Asia (Kobe), Europe (Brighton) and the United States (Honolulu), and other conferences, such as 2016's inaugural conferences on Global Studies and on the City, held in Barcelona, also provide rich opportunities to engage with literary academics on the world stage. The Barcelona conference held a special panel on the vibrant literary genre of crime fiction that inspired the inclusion of the first two papers in this issue.

A common theme among this year's six papers, indeed, is how literature addresses issues of justice and injustice, be they personal, societal or international. The issue reminds us of the vital role that both literature and its criticism play in bringing people and institutions to account for their beliefs and actions.

Bill Phillips kicks off the issue by contextualising the genre of crime fiction with a wide-ranging and engagingly exemplified survey that takes us from the genre's origins in Edgar Allan Poe to the social fiction of recent times, showing the gradual process by which writers have developed a social conscience and consciousness. **Isabel Santaularia** takes us to the Mexico depicted in Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez*, picking up on some of the issues of masculinity raised in the previous paper and demonstrating both how the Frontier has been a locus of male fantasies, and how the deconstruction of the masculine space presents manifold challenges to the modern male.

Another essentially male preserve has been the battlefield, and **Fahri Öz** reveals the uneasy relationship between Civil War-era poet Walt Whitman and the British poets that followed him in World War I, showing how the rhetoric and imagery of literature can as equally be turned towards the romanticisation of martial violence as towards its vilification.

Next we move to the African continent, where **Hellen Roselyne L. Shigali** outlines the remarkable literary history of the region. She shows how literature has informed the rule of progressive leaders, and how literary figures such as veteran Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o have spoken truth to power by challenging the ideology and actions of the more autocratic politicians.

Piers M. Smith takes us on to Roland Barthes' travelogues of the Far East, although the subject of his paper is more correctly the question of objectivity, or lack thereof, in observers' perspectives on foreign destinations, and how the 'neutral view' espoused by Barthes represents a breakthrough in such viewpoints, allowing non-judgmental analysis and more legitimate reflection on the 'other'.

The issue concludes with **Frederik De Vadder's** unravelling of the ontological and epistemological implications of Michael Chabon's postmodern novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. As an example of 'historiographic metafiction', the novel can be seen as challenging the boundaries of the fictional and real in numerous ways, revealing the exciting potentialities that fiction still holds to represent our ever-challenging and ever-challenged human existence.

Once again, the *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*, like all IAFOR journals, provides completely free and unfettered online access to examples of cutting-edge scholarship from both well-established and up-and-coming scholars. It is a fascinating snapshot of the multifaceted and spirited nature of literary commentary in the second decade of the twenty-first century. I hope the papers in this issue prove just as thought-provoking and stimulating for our readers as they have for me.

Richard Donovan, Editor, *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*

Crime Fiction: A Global Phenomenon

Bill Phillips
Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Crime fiction, if you choose to classify it in its broadest sense, has a very long history. Detectives can be found in ancient texts from around the world. One of the things these texts reveal is a common global desire for justice to be done, and to be seen to be done. Often serving as political and/or religious propaganda, they provide assurance that the authorities are protecting their people from wrongdoers and injustice.

Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", published in 1841, is often held to be the first detective story, and Poe's cerebral hero, Auguste Dupin, provided the model for later literary sleuths such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, all three of whom collaborate on a regular basis with the police.

Ironically, however, Poe's model represents a significant change in direction with regard to earlier crime/detective fiction. No longer concerned with justice, or a just society, Dupin, Holmes and Poirot are concerned solely with the solving of a puzzle to the satisfaction of their own egos. Rarely, if ever, are the social causes behind the crimes they investigate revealed. While it is true the stories are comforting in their conservatism, change is resolutely avoided. By the nineteen-seventies, detective writers began to deconstruct the traditional English golden age and American hard-boiled crime genre and were returning it to its former concerns. Around the world crime writers are now using the genre as a means to explore themes such as discrimination, corruption, inequality, poverty and injustice. The crime novel, and especially the postcolonial crime novel, is the social novel of our day.

Keywords: crime fiction, postcolonial studies, social novel

The Book of Daniel, chapter thirteen, tells the story of Susanna, the beautiful and virtuous wife of the wealthy Babylonian, Joacim. Two elderly men, appointed as judges by the community, are so filled with lust at her beauty that they resolve to rape her. Hiding in her garden while she bathes, they take advantage of her maids' momentary absence to force themselves upon her, threatening her with accusations of adultery if she does not comply. Susanna, however, refuses to submit and cries out desperately until her maids return. The two elders subsequently claim that they had surprised her committing adultery with a young man, had attempted to apprehend them, but were overpowered by the youth, who had then run away.

In court the word of the two elderly judges outweighs that of the young woman, and she is condemned to death. She prays to God, who directs Daniel to defend her. Certain of her innocence, Daniel convinces the community that the elders should be cross-examined separately. The first, on being asked from where the two of them had seen Susanna's crime, claims they were sheltering beneath a mastic tree. The second says it was an oak. Given the significant difference between the two kinds of tree it is obvious that the elders are lying. They are put to death, Susanna's virtue is restored, and Daniel's reputation grows among the people.

This story, possibly Hebrew in origin, survives in Greek and may have been written down in that language in the second century BC. It is a story accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, but is considered apocryphal by Protestants.

Some critics have suggested that this is "an early ancestor of the [crime] genre, with Daniel chief investigator" (Scaggs 2005, 7). Others see this story as proof that crime fiction is of Christian origin. Trond Berg Eriksen claims that "[t]he crime novel is one of the few literary genres that we do not know from pre-Christian Antiquity" and that "the genre has Christian preconditions" (Hansen 2012, 143). If we combine such assertions with the legislative significance often given to Mosaic law, or the Ten Commandments, listed in Exodus chapter 20 of the Bible, then Christianity or, rather, to correct Eriksen, Judaism, is the origin and source of both law and justice. As the Danish academic Kim Toft Hansen argues, "What we may gain from these assertions that crime fiction represents equal rights for everybody in instigating criminal investigations regardless of the status of the victim in question—is the emphasis on moral metaphysics and ethical essentialism" (ibid, 144). Investigating crime, regardless of the victim's status, is a moral action.

Whatever their origin, crime narratives seem to have existed around the world for a long time. In Arabic cultures they can be traced back to the twelfth century (ibid, 146), where their concern was "for finding just solutions to ethical and juridical transgressions", a concern that Hansen claims to be "cross-cultural and found in every era" (ibid, 146). A further example of this is the Chinese *gongan* genre, perhaps originating as an oral tradition in the seventh century before being written down in the twelfth. The *gongan* narratives are centred on the investigations carried out by judges, who may well have been responsible for the recording of their own deeds. The purpose seems to have been political—in the same way that much crime fiction available nowadays on public television is political—it is an assurance that the emperor and his servants are diligent in their pursuit of crime and injustice (ibid, 147). A modern equivalent would be the long-running television series *Law and Order*, which comforts the viewer in the knowledge that criminal investigation, followed by prosecution and judgement, will unfailingly condemn the guilty and protect the innocent. The equally tedious series *CSI* serves the same purpose, although here it is government investment in science and technology that ensures the safety of the people and the incorruptibility of the system.

This brief introduction demonstrates the global and historical reach of crime fiction, but more particularly the reason for its universality—the global desire for truth and justice. Ironically, the period considered in the West to be a Golden Age of crime fiction is, I would argue, out of joint with the genre. Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", published in 1841, is widely held to be the first detective story, though this, of course,

given what I have said before, is questionable. Poe's hero, the cerebral and opinionated Chevalier Auguste Dupin, appears in a total of three short stories, the other two being "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844). Poe's model was enormously influential on many writers, most famously Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Agatha Christie's Poirot novels owe a number of features to Poe. For example, the stories are, supposedly, written down by the great detective's assistant. In Dupin's case he is anonymous, though always present in the narrative; Holmes has his Dr. Watson; and Poirot, Captain Hastings. The crimes are always solved, and the unfortunate police service, made up of members of the lower orders, is shown to be incorrigibly incompetent.

If, however, we were to look back at the story of Susanna, the Arabic tradition of crime narrative, or the Chinese *gongan*, we would find that a significant shift of emphasis has occurred. It is no longer on "moral metaphysics and ethical essentialism", but rather a Romantic, or Post-Romantic, obsession with the heroic individual, at odds with the police and the government—though both needy of and needed by the establishment—a celebration of the rational, the scientific method and the successful solving of a puzzle. Holmes's cases are rarely about murder, or the exploration of moral conundrums. They are usually about the restitution of property to its rightful owner. Poirot's cases, though of murder, are never much concerned with the victim, who, as often as not, turns out to have deserved his or her fate; if justice is served it is at a very abstract level. What is important to Agatha Christie is that after the wretched discovery of the cadaver, the Edenic village green and afternoon tea of the privileged middle classes be returned, again and again, and as discreetly as possible, to its pre-lapsarian idyll. Lee Horsley argues that this particular brand of detective fiction represents

a constricting intellectual and emotional retreat from uncomfortable realities, the diversion of an insular community turning its back on much that was of importance in interwar society.... We would never guess, immersed in the world of golden age detection, that we were reading about a period of history in which there was, for example, rapidly increasing unemployment, the General Strike of 1926, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the rise of the European dictatorships. The majority of those who wrote detective fiction during these decades are associated with right-wing socio-political views. (2005, 38–9)

Similar sentiments are expressed by John Scaggs:

Christie's upper-middle-class semi-rural village communities, while they provide the formal device of offering a closed society and a correspondingly closed circle of suspects, also reflect Christie's conservative social vision. Christie's inter-war fiction, in particular, and its country house settings, are not a reflection of contemporary life, but a recollection of Paradise Lost. (2005, 48)

Put simply, the Golden Age of crime fiction provided a familiar and reliable escape into a dream world which did not challenge its readers (except with regard to the identity of the murderer), nor inform them of the troubles and injustices prevalent in the society of the day. Indeed, its purpose was the opposite. In a chaotic world, it comforted the reader with the assumption that life was unchanging and immutable.

The American tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction, which coincided with Agatha Christie's English Golden Age, is no different. Claimed by Raymond Chandler in his essay "The Simple Art of Murder" to be a reaction against the English model, American detective fiction, critics nowadays agree, has its origins in the frontier narratives and the myths and legends of the Wild West. As Heather Worthington puts it:

the private detective came to epitomise the traditional American hero previously represented by the frontiersman/cowboy. ... The violence and dangers of the Wild West and its corrupt frontier towns were, in the twentieth century, transposed onto the mean city streets of interwar America. (2011, 122–3)

It is rebellious loners, heroic individuals pitted against an unforgiving world, upon whom the emphasis is placed. For Chandler, the detective hero had to provide his own moral code in the absence of anything more suitable elsewhere. Analysis of Chandler's Philip Marlowe and his successors, most notoriously Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, however, reveal that their code—based on their disdain for women, non-whites and non-heterosexual orientations—had no acceptable moral or ethical purpose. They were cynical, yet securely protected by the patriarchal institutions of local government, the police and the military. They often, indeed usually, solved their cases, yet at such a cost in violence and mayhem that justice was rarely served, as Dashiell Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*—an extraordinarily perceptive deconstruction of the genre—so brutally depicts. Hammett, one of the very few hard-boiled writers who seemed to have any interest in the many serious issues troubling American society in the early twentieth century was, ironically, lionised by Chandler, who seems to have been completely unaware that *Red Harvest* was a work of profound irony, both in a socio-political sense, and in a literary one. For Chandler, Hammett was the greatest of the hard-boiled writers whose fiction served as a model for future writers:

He was one of a group, the only one who achieved critical recognition, but not the only one who wrote or tried to write realistic mystery fiction. All literary movements are like this; some one individual is picked out to represent the whole movement; he is usually the culmination of the movement. Hammett was the ace performer. (1950, 194–5)

Christopher Breu argues that the social origins of the hard-boiled genre lie in the evolution of models of masculinity in the United States during the early twentieth century. He suggests that early *noir* writers were, probably unconsciously, modelling their heroes on black masculinity. For the working-class readers of pulp magazines the upper-middle-class protagonist of the kind created by Poe and Doyle was no longer relevant, while mass-production on the factory floor both provided an identity for the urban proletariat while at the same time threatening its very existence through increased mechanization.¹ This new, white, masculine identity views “women and other racialized and sexualized figures [as] the bearers of the monstrosity the protagonist disavows” (Breu 2005, 55). Breu goes on to argue that the “hard-boiled story inherits, and fully exploits, a set of racial and gendered meanings from psychological noir that carry both misogyny and racism within their phantasmatic charge” (ibid, 56).

This set of meanings, then, helps to explain the misogyny, racism and homophobia prevalent in the hard-boiled genre. Chandler, for example, is unstinting in his use of racist language when black people have the misfortune to appear in his work. In *Farewell, My Lovely* the first chapter begins with the following, suggestive sentence: “It was one of the mixed blocks over on Central Avenue, the blocks that are not yet all negro” (1940/1988, 7). This chapter and the following include four separate highly racist terms for black people without the slightest hint of demurral by the author. One black man is consistently assigned the pronoun ‘it’, and a seated group is described in eerily Conradian terms: “Eyes looked at us, chestnut coloured eyes, set in faces that ranged from grey to deep black. Heads turned slowly and the eyes in them glistened and stared in the dead alien silence of another race” (ibid, 10; spelling as in this British-English edition).

Women, meanwhile, are either distant and virtuous beauties, or *femmes fatales*. In either case their role is minimal, though potentially pernicious. Mickey Spillane, whose career as a writer spanned nearly fifty years from 1947 to 1996, was particularly harsh to women, so much so that Umberto Eco, only half-jokingly, suggested that Spillane's fictional detective, Mike Hammer, was so psychologically disturbed that his character was a mixture of “sado-masochism

¹ See C. Breu, “Wearing the Black Mask” in *Hard-boiled Masculinities* (2005, 23–56) for a fascinating account of the relationship between masculinity and the rise of hard-boiled fiction.

and [...] suspected impotence” (1984/1992, 157). Certainly an unusual number of Spillane’s novels climax with Mike Hammer disposing of the female villain in lurid physical detail. Here are three examples published consecutively between 1951 and 1953:

I thumped [sic] the lighter and in the moment of time before the scream blossoms into the wild cry of terror she was a mass of flame tumbling on the floor.... (*Kiss Me, Deadly*, 1953/1965, 158)

[T]he tongue of flame that blasted from the muzzle seemed to lick out across the room with a horrible vengeance that ripped all the evil from her face, turning it into a ghastly wet red mask that was really no face at all. (*The Big Kill*, 1951/1970, 158)

Slowly, she looked down at the ugly swelling in her naked belly where the bullet went in. A thin trickle of blood welled out. (*I, the Jury*, 1952/1960, 188)

In the nineteen-seventies, following the awakening brought about by the Women’s Movement, the Civil Rights Movement and the Gay Rights Movement, especially in the United States, crime fiction was forced to re-examine itself. In doing so it unconsciously returned to its ancient, global origins. Joseph Hansen’s first Dave Brandstetter novel, *Fadeout*, was published in 1971. What is significant about the novel is that Brandstetter is gay, and while the narrative itself is conventional, the detective is, by his very existence, a statement about rights and social justice. In 1972 the Barcelona writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán published *Yo maté a Kennedy* (*I Killed Kennedy*), the first of a series of novels whose detective hero Pepe Carvalho, sidekick Biscúter and girlfriend Charo provide the first modern, comprehensive deconstruction of the detective genre since Hammett’s *Red Harvest*. Montalbán, an unrepentant communist right up to the day of his death at Bangkok airport in 2003, was an unashamedly political writer. Deliberately cocking a snook at the hard-boiled tradition which declared only virgins worthy of the hero’s regard, Pepe Carvalho’s girlfriend, Charo, is a prostitute. Insistent that good food is the right of all, Carvalho is a gourmet cook who eats his meals directly from the saucepan in defiance of bourgeois notions of delicacy. The Pepe Carvalho novels chronicle the Spanish transition from dictatorship to democracy and are deeply critical of society at that time, and in particular of the Socialist government led by Felipe Gonzalez, an administration which ended in disgrace with ministers in jail for government-sponsored terrorism, and an ex-prime minister forever tainted and sidelined.

In 1982, Sara Paretsky published *Indemnity Only* and Sue Grafton *A is for Alibi*, both novels the first of series with female private detectives whose intention was specifically to focus on injustice, inequality and violence, particularly when perpetrated against women.

In 1990, Walter Mosley began his Easy Rawlins series. Set in postwar Los Angeles, it describes the hardships and injustices faced by the Black community, in the Watts neighbourhood, as migrants from the Southern states of the USA moved northwards and westwards in search of a better life.

Of course Hansen was not the first gay detective writer, nor Paretsky and Grafton the first women detective writers, nor Mosley the first black detective writer (let us not forget Chester Himes), though, again, Vázquez Montalbán may lay claim to being the first detective writer to comprehensively deconstruct the hard-boiled genre since Dashiell Hammett. All five, however, are significant because they coincide with a widespread questioning of the genre and its conversion, or rather return, to an emphasis on ethics and equal rights and justice for all, regardless of the status of the victim, or the ego of the detective. They move away from the sterile and vicious introspection championed by the likes of Chandler and Spillane, and move towards a wider, more embracing engagement with the world both in literary and political terms.

However, nineteen-nineties crime fiction had not, or did not seem to have, truly regained its global origins, remaining largely British and American. True, there were exceptions such as

Sweden's Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, who began their Martin Beck series with *Roseanna* in 1965, but they were little known internationally until the boom in Scandinavian crime fiction in the twenty-first century led to their republication; or the aforementioned Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, whose Barcelona-set novels were unknown outside of the Spanish-speaking world until very recently. Australia's Peter Corris, whose first Cliff Hardy novel, *The Dying Trade*, was published in 1980, was well known in his own country but not elsewhere, while one of the great short stories of crime, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, set in Melbourne and first published in Australia, in 1886, has only really, and even then not very widely, returned to prominence with the broadcasting of the ABC telemovie of the same name in 2012.

What Sjöwall and Wahlöö, and Vázquez Montalbán, share with their slightly later American counterparts, however, is their concern for political, ethical and social issues, rather than the aggrandisement of the detective himself. One of the ways they do this is by depicting the shortcomings rather than the infallibility of the protagonist. This has now become commonplace in contemporary crime fiction, which, at the same time, has once again become truly international. Scandinavian crime fiction, most often associated with Stieg Larssen's problematic *Millennium Trilogy*,² is probably best served by the works of Henning Mankell, who sadly died in 2015, in which a flawed police detective attempts to grapple with a slowly disintegrating society, much as Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö did in the nineteen sixties, though to less acclaim. Italian crime fiction is now well known internationally, especially through the novels of Andrea Camilleri, whose *comisario* Salvo Montalbano, named in homage of the Godfather of Mediterranean *noir*, Vázquez Montalbán, explores the faultlines in Italian society. In 2011 the Greek crime writer Petros Makaris won the seventh Pepe Carvalho prize for Mediterranean *noir*, his novels chronicling Greece's recent economic, political and social woes, while in Turkey, between 2008 and 2014, Mehmet Murat Somer published five novels depicting a transvestite amateur detective in deliberate and risky defiance of his government's increasing intolerance towards whatever they perceive to be unIslamic in behaviour.

A relatively new phenomenon which has gained strength in the twenty-first century is postcolonial crime fiction. While, of course, crime fiction has long been written in countries such as Australia—*The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* from 1886 being an obvious example—it was not recognised as being postcolonial, nor had the crime genre itself yet been transformed in such a way that the characteristics and concerns of postcolonial fiction found in it a congenial home. Equally, crime fiction such as Peter Corris's novels, based mainly in Sydney, or Garry Disher's Challis and Destry novels, set in the Mornington Peninsula of the Australian state of Victoria, are concerned almost exclusively with the misdeeds of a white populace of largely European origin. For Australian fiction the most burning issue needing address is the representation of Aboriginal peoples. Certainly the effective absence of Aboriginals in the work of Peter Corris, and virtually the entirety of Garry Disher's *œuvre*, is significant, but no more than their absence in Australian fiction in general.

Early representations of Aboriginals in Australian crime fiction, and especially Arthur Upfield's novels about the half-Aboriginal, half-white police detective, Napoleon Bonaparte, have received substantial attention, including a book-length collection of essays published in 2012 (Hoog *et al.*). The Australian critic Stephen Knight describes Bonaparte—usually referred to (as was the French Tyrant by the English) as Bony—as an “inherently demeaning carnivalisation of native vigour” (Knight 2006, 21). This, then, is colonial, rather than postcolonial, fiction. For this reason the novels of Peter Temple are interesting for their anguished attempts to represent Aboriginals in a way that does not demean them. Temple, of South African origin and therefore, presumably, less accustomed to rendering black people

² Bearing in mind the author's reputation as an anti-fascist activist, many critics have argued that the novels are ideologically confusing. Laurie Penny's article in *The New Statesman* is a typical example: “Decorating a punchy pseudo-feminist revenge fantasy in the gaudy packaging of crime drama rather muddles Larsson's message.”

invisible as readily as many Australians are, experiments with three different men, all in separate novels. The first two, Cameron Delray and Ned Lowey, appear in Temple's earlier works, the Jack Irish series (*Bad Debts*, 1996; *Black Tide*, 1999; *Dead Point*, 2000; and *White Dog*, 2003) and *An Iron Rose* (1998), respectively. Both are a little too good to be true. Delray is an all-round tough guy, gourmet and ladies' man, while Lowey is a stereotype of an older, wiser, rural shaman. The third, Sergeant Paul Dove, who appears in *The Broken Shore* (2005) and *Truth* (2009), which won the 2010 Miles Franklin award, is a far more complex, indeed at times unattractive, figure. It is clear that Temple has found it difficult, if not impossible, to represent Aboriginal men satisfactorily (there are no Aboriginal women with significant roles in his novels), but he has given it his best. As Carolyn D'Cruz observes: "The matter of who speaks for and about whom is possibly the most sensitive and impassioned issue circulating within discourses of identity politics" (2001). For this reason, one of the most highly acclaimed crime novels about Aboriginals is by an Aboriginal. Philip McLaren's *Scream Black Murder*, in the words of Stephen Knight, "makes it seem natural, as well as proper, to have competent black professionals supervising the problems of their own world" (2006, 22).

Meanwhile, South African crime fiction is enjoying a boom equal to, or even greater than, that of Scandinavia. The Godfather of South African crime fiction is James McClure, who wrote eight police procedurals between 1971 and 1991. Although British, McClure was born and grew up in South Africa, and only migrated to Britain as a grown man. His novels, published from England, ridicule the Apartheid system through the figures of the Afrikaaner police lieutenant Tromp Kramer and his "Bantu" or Zulu sergeant, Mickey Zondi. McLure is successful in allowing us to sympathise not only with Zondi, but also with Kramer, despite our repugnance at his profession. This is partly achieved by demonstrating the far greater monstrosity of other Afrikaaners, and partly through Kramer's unacknowledgeable recognition that Zondi is the better detective. Another crime writer, Wessel Ebersohn, also writing during the Apartheid years, created the figure of Yudel Gordon, a psychiatrist often called on to treat prison inmates and hence drawn into the investigation of crime. Ebersohn was increasingly harassed by the South African police, eventually being forced into hiding, and his books were banned.

Post-Apartheid, meanwhile, has seen an outpouring of crime fiction by Deon Meyer, Margie Orford, Mike Nicol and Roger Smith, among others. These novels are worldwide bestsellers, particularly Meyer's, which, originally written in Afrikaans, have been translated into twenty languages. All four writers use crime fiction to lay bare post-Apartheid South Africa's government corruption, HIV-AIDS, poverty, violence, the legacy of the past and, above all, the jostling for power among the different ethnic groups comprising the Rainbow Nation.

India also has its crime writers, most famously Satyajit Ray, the Bengali film director, who wrote thirty-nine Feluda stories between 1965 and his death in 1992. Set largely in Kolkata, the stories were inspired by Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, and represent a classic example, according to Heather Worthington, with a nod to Bill Ashcroft *et al.*, of the empire writing back (Worthington 2011, 173). Two writers, Aravind Adiga, whose *The White Tiger* won the prestigious Man Booker prize in 2008, and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, published in 2006, condemn the crime and corruption endemic to Indian society with a power rarely achieved before except, perhaps, in the work of Salman Rushdie. Unlike Rushdie, however, Adiga and Chandra concentrate on the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalised. It should be added—and here identity politics once again rears its head—that both Adiga and Chandra have been condemned by Indian critics for their unvarnished portrayals of the country and, to make matters worse, for having left the country and living abroad.

The global reach of crime fiction is so extensive that this paper could continue indefinitely, but I wish to look at one more way that crime fiction contributes to and enriches our

understanding of the world—stories set in the recent past. There was a fashion, now largely faded, for historical crime fiction to be set in the Middle Ages, in Ancient Rome, or in the Ottoman Empire, among others. These are entertaining for those curious about the distant past, though their veracity seems at times questionable. Of greater interest are novels set in the more recent past which shed light on those events which were to have ongoing repercussions for the present day. Adrian McKinty's five Sean Duffy novels, set in Northern Ireland in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties but written between 2012 and 2016, are an excellent example. McKinty unequivocally refers to The Troubles as a war, but the thirty or forty years which have passed since the events he describes enable him to write with a heretofore impossible objectivity. In McKinty's novels, everyone is corrupt, self-serving and cynical. Northern Ireland is ruled by sectarian terrorist gangs who have carved up the country and divided it among themselves—indeed, the disciplined extortion and oppression of their respective territories provides a rare example of resolute cooperation. The forces of occupation are represented by Inspector Sean Duffy, a Catholic member of the largely Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary. Duffy and his colleagues, with whom he enjoys a wary relationship, regularly raid their fortified police station's confiscated drugs locker, earn substantial overtime policing the unceasing riots in what was then futuristic defensive armour, and drink copious quantities of Guinness and malt whisky—the Scottish variety preferred. All of the novels are set around significant moments such as the 1981 IRA hunger strikes or the John Delorean scandal in 1982.

Like Aristotle I have long believed that there is greater truth in crime fiction than boring history. McKinty's rendering of Northern Ireland in the seventies and eighties bears no relation at all to the reports provided by the media at the time and for that alone exudes credibility. Fiction enables us to share emotions and comprehend the psychological consequences of events in a way that impersonal historiography does not. Crime fiction allows us to explore the darkest corners of society, from the highest and richest in the land to the lowest; wherever victims, injustice and corruption are to be found, the detective has access. Despite this potential breadth of subject matter, however, it is clear that certain issues are of more concern than others, depending on their location. South African crime fiction is obsessed with the legacy of Apartheid, Indian with Partition, and Irish with the Troubles. No doubt similar obsessions could be found for most regions or countries—crime fiction set in the southwest of the United States, for example, is about the border, the drugs, and migration, Don Winslow being one of the best contemporary writers to deal with these issues in his novels *The Power of the Dog* (2005), *Savages* (2010) and *The Cartel* (2015).

But not all runs smoothly in the world of global crime fiction. The novels and stories themselves may actually contribute to the ills they appear to expose. An example of this is neocolonial crime fiction practised by writers such as the Englishman HRF Keating, whose twenty-six Inspector Ghote novels, written between 1964 and 2008 and set in Bombay, reinforce long-outdated stereotypes of India and Indians. Keating, infamously, did not set foot in India until ten years after the publication of his first Inspector Ghote novel. Worse still are the Scotsman Alexander McCall Smith's seventeen novels set in Botswana and based on the adventures of private detective Precious Ramotswe. Precious Ramotswe is the type of character created by Margaret Mitchell for *Gone with the Wind*, to be played on the big screen by Hattie McDaniel, or to be seen, only from her knees down, perched on a tottering stool in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. The stereotyping is that bad. But similar criticisms could be levelled at many crime writers from around the world, as we saw with the case of the Anglo-Australian Arthur Upfield. This is particularly problematic in South Africa, whose four contemporary writers mentioned earlier are all white. An extended exposure to these novels leads the reader to fall back into the old Apartheid myth that South Africa is in fact a white country. The novels' protagonists are nearly all white men. They are anguished and, quite often, damaged by the Apartheid years and the Struggle for liberation, usually because they were on the wrong side.

Their stories are handled with sensitivity, and the country's post-Apartheid democracy is unquestionably celebrated, yet one cannot help wondering whether the difficulties faced by black South Africans might not be more worthy of concern, both for the numbers involved and the horrors they endured.

The one major black character in Deon Meyer's novels, Thobela Mpayipheli, is a case in point. A hero of the struggle, Mpayipheli is effectively excluded from reintegration into post-Apartheid society precisely because of his brutal and brutalised past. Yet he is a gentle man, resigned to a life of labour and struggle with his wife and stepson. When they are gratuitously murdered Mpayipheli is unhinged and becomes a vigilante executioner of child-murderers. Understandable though his actions are, and though few mourn his victims, anyone familiar with the crime genre knows that he will not get away with it, and, inevitably, he is killed. I cannot help comparing Meyer's treatment of Mpayipheli with his white protagonists—alcoholics, screwups, former members of the Apartheid South African Police—now members of the slightly renamed South African Police Service, or SAPS, whose shortcomings are treated with far greater tolerance. There is something disturbing about a white Afrikaaner author creating a black man who becomes unhinged, runs amok, and has to be put down.

Few crime writers in South Africa are black, the most celebrated of the few being Meshack Masondo, who died in 2013, selling over 400,000 copies of his work, all of which was written in isiZulu. As far as I know he has never been translated into English. Similarly, Surender Mohan Pathak, a Hindi-language crime-fiction writer from Amritsar in the Punjab, has written nearly 300 novels, of which only a very few have been translated into English. Perhaps they chose not to have their works translated, but had they done so, as the Scandinavians, the Afrikaaners and so many others have done, they might have made a great deal of money out of the crime-fiction boom. Perhaps, but the issue of language and, indeed, genre is sensitive. The novel began as a European genre—even, it might be said, as an imperial genre. English is clearly an imperialist language, and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century crime fiction appears, initially at least, to be even more Anglo-American than the novel itself. Amadou Koné, an African author and academic, has argued that African culture already contains the equivalent of detective fiction in its initiation narratives. "The examination of the African initiation narratives," he argues, "has shown that these topoi are not necessarily used exclusively by detective narratives" (2012, 179). One explanation for the dearth of Black African crime fiction then is quite simply that Africa does not need the westernised genre when it already has a version of its own.

We come full circle. Crime fiction is both ancient and global. It is a vehicle for identity politics, nationalism, transnationalism and neocolonialism. But what has become increasingly prevalent over recent decades is its concern for social justice and the betterment of our world. It would appear that all cultures contain detective narratives of one kind or another. What is certain is that there is a global desire for truth and justice to prevail. We no longer necessarily believe that law and justice have a divine origin as Susanna and Daniel did. But perhaps it doesn't really matter, if the outcome is the same.

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**The Frontier as Masculine Territory:
Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* in Context**

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Abstract

Contemporary adventure narratives—from westerns and war stories to thrillers and hard-boiled detective fictions—still insistently activate the myth of the frontier, which is offered as a space where men can achieve regeneration and a sense of purpose by indulging a form of masculinity based on violence and aggression. Increasingly, however, the frontier emerges as just a temporary respite and the violence of the protagonists ends up being self-destructive. Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* (2011), a crime story situated on the US–Mexico border, is a case in point since the novel reveals the sterility of a myth that transports men to nostalgic spaces and past forms of masculinity rather than compel them to adjust to redefinitions of masculinity based on the incorporation of new (feminine) attributes. In this paper I analyse Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* alongside other contemporary texts which, like Hawken's novel, locate the male protagonists in frontier scenarios, such as the television series *The Shield* (Fox 2002–2008), *Deadwood* (HBO 2004–2006), *Jericho* (CBS 2006–2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013), *Dexter* (Showtime 2006–2013) and *Fargo* (FX 2014–). I argue that, in spite of their deconstruction of the frontier ethos and associated forms of masculine behaviour, they do not contemplate an alternative form of heroic masculinity in a culture in which the lonesome cowboy is still a national icon.

Keywords: Sam Hawken, *The Dead Women of Juárez*, contemporary American television series, western, the myth of the frontier, masculinity

Introduction: The American Frontier and Masculinity

Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* (2011) is the author's first novel in a series situated on the US–Mexico border, which comprises *Tequila Sunset* (2012), *Juárez Dance* (2013), *La Frontera* (2013) and *Missing* (2014). Explicitly written to shine a light on the *feminicidios* that take place in Ciudad Juárez and to bring them to public attention, the novel focuses on the attempt by the American protagonist, the boxer Kelly Courtier, to rebuild his life in Mexico after his boxing career in the States fails because of his addiction to drugs, as well as on Kelly's involvement in an investigation into the disappearance and murder of his Mexican girlfriend Paloma Salazar in Ciudad Juárez. Located in one of the United States' 'new frontiers' along the Mexican–US border, *The Dead Women of Juárez* is a crime novel that contains the tropes that have attained mythic status in our understanding of the American West and which "have become embedded in western consciousness" (McGilchrist 2010: 119), perpetuated as they are through endless dime novels and western films. Namely, the novel portrays: a frontier location, the liminal Ciudad Juárez, which marks the divide between the 'civilised north' and the chaos and anarchy south of the border, aggravated by the wars waged between cartels and the federal police; the lone man, Kelly Courtier, who uses violence—in his case, his skills as a boxer—to regenerate himself and find a sense of purpose after his life disintegrates in the States; invisible, long-suffering, passive women—in the novel, the titular dead women of Juárez and their afflicted mothers and sisters; and the inevitably dark-skinned adversarial Other, in the novel embodied in Ciudad Juárez as a whole, ridden with chaos, corruption and lawlessness, and Mexicans in general, presented as openly hostile to the presence of white men seen as either imperialists taking advantage of Mexican resources and labour or as recreational tourists looking for cheap drugs and sex.

With its Ciudad Juárez–El Paso borderline scenario and the western ingredients mentioned above, Sam Hawken's novel paints a geography which presents the characteristics of America's foundational frontier, a harsh and inhospitable territory which required intrepid pioneers to rise to the occasion and approach dangers with bravery and determination. The frontier—as formulated by Theodore Roosevelt in his multivolume *The Winning of the West* (1889–96) and, above all, by Frederick J. Turner in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" delivered at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago in 1893—was, in fact, essential for the creation of the nation and the formation of the American character. In their texts, Turner and Roosevelt justified the logic of westward advance as an exciting and patriotic endeavour devised to fulfil the nation's 'Manifest Destiny', that is, "the God-given right of the 'American People' to claim the North American continent" (Baker 2008: 127) and their duty to bring democracy to lands swamped in savagery and barbarism.

Turner and Roosevelt also associated the American character with the values of the frontier, which, as critics such as Jane Tompkins, Sara Spurgeon, Brian Baker and David Rio have argued, not only masked "the reality of invasion, conquest and colonialism that made possible the European settlement of the Americas" (Tompkins 1992: 4), but were also gendered, equating American-ness with the attributes of the hardy, sturdy, harsh and individualistic (male) pioneer or the frontiersman. Thus, the American frontier was constructed as a masculine arena where men could pursue their exploits unencumbered by domestic codes of conduct or by feminine interference, and the 'true American'—as Leslie E. Fiedler described him in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1967)—became "the man in the wilderness, far from the sinister corruption of the civilised world" and "rising to extraordinariness, setting [his] jaws and walking into danger" (Mead 2010: 58). The (masculine/ist) frontier ethos, therefore, was forged in, and helped advance, the belief that rugged terrains could turn ordinary American men into heroes, and the adventure yarns produced subsequently, from westerns and frontier narratives to war stories, as well as, by extension, thrillers and hardboiled detective fictions,

were committed to the re-inscription of a dominant ideal of masculinity personified in the figure and the qualities of the lonesome cowboy finding regeneration through violence, a premise discussed by Richard Slotkin in his eponymous study.

The frontier ethos and its ideological foundations were brought to critical scrutiny after the Vietnam War. The conflict was promoted using frontier rhetoric which the citizenry received from political speeches delivered by the President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, himself fashioned as a war hero and a new frontiersman, as well as “from fanciful heroic portrayals of the West on television and film” (McGilchrist 2010: 26). As a consequence, “the war in Vietnam received much of its ideological justification from the idea of the ‘Old West’ and the myth of the frontier” (ibid: 26). However, the myth proved unable to mask the ugliness of the conflict as “[t]he climbing death toll and the planeloads of body bags” (Owens 2000: 31) containing the bodies of young American men, the revelations of massacres of innocent civilians and the images of burning villages forced a re-appraisal of events that had been seen as heroic in the past. Thus, as John Hellman writes, the Vietnam War was “the destruction, not of America, but of the myth which gave it life and in which Americans once believed” (1986: 110). The erosion of the myth of the frontier led to a disclosure of the agenda behind the country’s ‘Manifest Destiny’, revealed to stand for crass imperialism. It also necessarily involved a re-evaluation of the dominant form of aggressive masculinity that achieved heroic status through violence and adventurous forays into the wilderness. Other social developments in the sixties and seventies, such as the rise of feminism, the civil rights movement, and the pacifist and environmentalist doctrines spearheaded by the hippie and other lower-profile youth movements, further undermined the cultural orthodoxies of the times and brought the white-frontiersman model of masculinity and the myth that had spawned it to a spiralling downfall.

This assault on the frontiersman ethos that set the standards for hegemonic masculinity has resulted, allegedly since the nineties and still nowadays, in a crisis of masculinity among certain groups of men since they feel they have been deprived of the traditional referents of masculinity they looked up to for self-definition, as well as of the avenues of self-realisation they relied on to achieve a sense of importance and authority over Others, be it women or ‘other’ races or sexualities, or so authors such as Arthur Brittan, Anthony Clare, Susan Faludi and Michael Kimmel claim.¹ While this crisis may not be all-encompassing, widespread or, for that matter, new,² the truth is that, in the last decades, there have been significant social transformations that have profoundly affected the lives of contemporary Western men—who are no longer supposed to adhere to a stoic and aggressive form of masculinity as defined, for example, by Feigen Fasteau in *The Male Machine* (1974), or to expect their historical superiority to go unchallenged. As Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett explain, “never in history have men been so subject to question, media scrutiny and critically informed scholarship” (2006: 9).

Many critics and commentators locate the origins of this supposed crisis in external factors, such as the diminishing value of the physical, labouring male body in a technologised and bureaucratised society, a prevalent social and cultural disapproval of traditional displays of masculinity, and women’s triumphant assaults on male citadels of privilege that have resulted in a postfeminist society which has experienced a veritable ‘genderquake’, the idea popularised by Naomi Wolf that “the white male elite has lost its authority and is in the throes of losing

¹ Arthur Brittan, for example, wrote about men in crisis in the following terms: “Everywhere there are casualties, everywhere men are nursing their bruised egos, everywhere the course is littered with the debris of their unresolved sexual conflicts. [...] Now all we can see is the spectacle of countless millions of men experiencing acute gender anxieties. Something has gone badly wrong in the male psyche” (1989: 27).

² In 1987, for instance, Michael S. Kimmel explored the crisis of masculinity in history in his article “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective”.

power” (Whelehan 2000: 5).³ However, and, in my opinion, more pertinently, critics such as Faludi and Kimmel blame the anxiety, and concomitant anger, they observe in contemporary American men on their internalisation of dated notions of entitlement, privilege and authority based on the blueprint of the “time-tested tenets of what might be called the national male paradigm” (Faludi 2000: 26) associated with the iconic figure of the frontiersman and with the creed that to the (white American) man belongs the right to possess and conquer other territories and peoples. That it is manly to be surly, hostile and violent is an attitude which Faludi calls “the new desperado mandate” (ibid: 37). Norman Mailer described such an attitude as early as 1963 in the following terms:

[I]t was almost as if there were no peace unless one could fight well, kill well (if always with honour), love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be clashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun. And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed. (qtd. in Faludi 2000: 37)

According to Faludi, in our contemporary ethos this ‘desperado mandate’ has become merely a matter of cosmetics, a posture with no social responsibility attached to it in a context in which men have lost “a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent and reliable living, appreciation in the home, respectful treatment in the culture” (2000: 40). Also, as Kimmel argues, under more egalitarian conditions, white men cannot expect that their sex and race will automatically grant them pre-eminence in society. These situations, Faludi and Kimmel claim, have translated into legions of angry white men who feel beleaguered, cheated of their birthright, which promised them ascendancy simply because they were white and male, and, as a consequence, “a lot of men seem to believe that their only alternative is to draw the wagons into a circle, hoping that a reassertion of traditional ideologies of masculinity—and a return to the exclusion of ‘others’ from the competitive marketplace—will somehow resolve their present malaise” (Kimmel 2015: 10). Even though contemporary conditions call for re-adjustments of masculinity and for a degree of adaptability to new forms of being a man, the sense of powerlessness experienced by many men is often still countered by retreatism into heroic patterns of behaviour. In fact, the image of the western heroic man is “re-invoked, again and again, as a symbol of America’s rightness, goodness, honourableness, and manliness” (McGilchrist 2010: 37) in the media, in popular narratives and even in the discourse of politicians to justify military intervention abroad, especially after 9/11. Thus, traditional western mythology “still has a hold on the public imagination” (Rio 2014: 23) and survives as a means to legitimate violence in contemporary America, as Richard Slotkin explains in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992). The frontier and the wilderness, in turn, are still conjured up as loci of stable identity for alienated, anxious and angry white men that want to escape the conditions of modern life and the pressures and demands of domesticity. As Jane Tompkins explains:

The West [as well as the frontier/wilderness] functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanised existence, economic dead-ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political

³ Even though the gains of feminism cannot be denied and women have advantages they did not enjoy in the past, at least in our Western world, it does not mean that women have achieved equality with men in all areas of their lives. Also, popular media still disseminates sexist images of women, as well as the idea that the home is women’s rightful sphere of action, a situation which critics such as Imelda Whelehan, Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, Susan J. Douglas, and Diane Negra refer to in terms such as retro-sexism (Whelehan), the postfeminist mystique (Munford and Waters), enlightened sexism (Douglas) and retreatism (Negra).

injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation [...]—[...] a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real. (1992: 4)

Popular narratives often resort to frontier scenarios, against the backdrop of which angry white men expect to regain a sense of manliness through violence, or which are used as escape routes where they will find alternatives to oppressive domestic conditions, alienating working environments or the repercussions of the law. Examples abound among contemporary television series. The actual historical frontier is reproduced in the series *Deadwood* (HBO 2004–2006), in which the Deadwood encampment is presented, at the beginning of the series, as a dreamscape where men can start anew unencumbered by their pasts and devote their lives to prospecting for gold and spending the money they earn on women, gambling and alcohol. In *Jericho* (CBS 2006–2008), a series of nuclear explosions that destroy the major cities in the United States returns the Jericho community to a pre-technological past which resonates with western iconography. This lapse into the past precipitated by the destruction of contemporary society guarantees a reinstatement of men in their traditional roles as masters and commanders and allows them to exercise a form of masculinity based on inborn ingenuity, physicality, aggression and manual work. Characters such as Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) and Walter White (Bryan Cranston) from *The Shield* (Fox 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013), respectively, are modern-day cowboys who are not above breaking the law and who operate in the frontier-like ganglands of Los Angeles, in the case of Vic, and the New Mexico–Mexico borderlands and desert, in the case of Walter. In both series, the protagonists ‘break bad’ to make money to provide for their families, but they increasingly get lost in their bad-boy roles, which they prefer to the alternative of home and their demanding and asphyxiating wives and children. In the context of the frozen desolation of rural Minnesota in the television series *Fargo* (FX 2014–), meek, henpecked and insignificant men go feral through their association with outlaws and desperados, who plunge them into lives of violence, murder and, also, excitement. And to mention one last example, the serial killer Dexter (Michael C. Hall) in the eponymous series (Showtime 2006–2013) escapes his cosmopolitan Miami life and settles in an unspecified lumberjack location up north after almost exchanging his murderous instincts for a contented life as a loving husband and father.

The Frontier and Masculinity in *The Dead Women of Juárez*

The frontier city of Ciudad Juárez, as stated, is the chosen setting for Sam Hawken’s troubled protagonist, Kelly Courtier, to start anew and leave behind his past after being involved in a hit-and-run accident in which he killed a boy riding a bicycle while driving under the influence of drugs. However, the frontier fails to deliver, as the myth promises, any form of regeneration for the protagonist, and while Hawken resorts to the iconography and thematic patterns of the western, he ultimately critiques the ideology that accompanied it and gave it power, including the implication that aggression necessarily grants control over the environment and that the exercise of violence will restore men to positions of authority and privilege.

Ciudad Juárez in the novel has elements of the traditional western enclaves found in numerous classical and revisionist westerns or in related genres set in contemporary Mexico, such as Robert Rodriguez’s films *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and his ‘Mariachi’ trilogy—*El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995) and *Once upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). It is a city of seedy bars and saloons, like *La Posada del Indio*, which, in spite of its name, is not an inn and “barely a saloon” with its “tiny stage for a single dancing girl, a compact bar with two men doubling as bartenders and pimps, plus a dozen tables around which girls constantly [circulate]” (2011: 16). In tourist districts “jammed with gringos” (ibid: 39), there are shabby strip clubs and brothels, with hookers “on all the corners, standing alone or in clusters” (ibid: 39). Away from the tourist spots, streets are dusty and cars, trucks and the few pedestrians who

dare to walk outside bake in the sun in areas where “apartments and businesses freely [mix] in a dingy clustering of old buildings stained by age and little upkeep” (ibid: 282). There are prisons described as “dark and filthy and terrible” (ibid: 218); decrepit and brutal *palenques*, where cock and dog fights take place, situated in neighbourhoods that “[rot] into the desert flats” (ibid: 68); and the *colonias* at “the porous boundary between Ciudad Juárez and the sun-bleached wild beyond” (ibid: 96). These *colonias* are sprawls of “shanties built from scrap wood and corrugated aluminium” situated where “the streetlights and paving [end]” in a broken landscape of “dirt, sand and a few water-starved trees” (ibid: 96). The *colonias* are dangerous—one of the protagonists recalls a uniformed policeman he knew was “beaten or stabbed patrolling the *colonias* or collecting statements for some crime or the other” (ibid: 187)—as is the whole of Ciudad Juárez, at siege ever since “the Sinaloa cartel came to the city” (ibid: 173) and the war between the cartels and the federal police started. As a consequence, in different parts of the city, the landscape changes from western-like to resembling a war zone with barbed wire, barricades and jeeps mounted with heavy machine guns, where policemen chase “the bad men with AK-47s and rocket launchers” (ibid: 191). The presence of “bloodthirsty” (ibid: 12), “hardcore” (ibid: 15) *traficantes* also means that, even though the number of policemen in the city has multiplied, the law is less enforced. The police are so busy trying to contain the cartels that other crimes go undetected, and, when so many people are dying because of the drug wars, brutal interrogation practices and police corruption are waved away as insignificant.

Although the actual demarcation between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso is difficult to spot because the two seem “washed together along the banks of the Rio Grande in the wake of a flood” (ibid: 159), they are distinct territories at opposite ends of the law-and-order spectrum. In El Paso, the law is operative and justice works. In Ciudad Juárez, chaos, anarchy and corruption rule, so the city is the perfect hide-out for Kelly, where he can escape the consequences of his crime in El Paso. In Ciudad Juárez, he makes a living by participating in shady boxing fights and selling soft drugs to tourists with his Mexican friend Estéban Salazar, with whom he establishes a homosocial bond based on true friendship, unwavering loyalty and mutual respect. His relationship with Estéban’s sister, Paloma, also means that Kelly has access to wild sex. Stereotypically, Paloma—described as “not beautiful”, with her “wide hips and a full body that stupid men up north would call chunky” (2011: 19)—is sexually uninhibited, making sure Kelly has his fair share of satisfaction as well—when she gives him a blowjob, her grip on his member is “tight, insistent and her mouth [...] searing” and when he “[comes], she swallow[s]” (ibid: 21). His stint in Ciudad Juárez and his relationship with both Estéban and Paloma have positive, revitalising effects on Kelly, who decides to give up hard drugs for good, exercise to be on top form and stop participating in fights in which he is simply used as a punch-bag, paired with healthier, younger and fitter Mexican fighters for the entertainment of crowds who enjoy seeing a gringo bleed. When he is made an offer to take part in illegal bare-knuckle fights, he is adamant he is now fit and healthy and will not consent to be used as a sacrificial lamb, so he tells the man who offers him the deal, “Goddammit, you little son of a bitch. [...] You want to fight with me? I don’t give a shit how many guys you got with you, I’ll tear you a new asshole! [...] You find somebody else to bleed for you” (ibid: 73).

Kelly embraces Ciudad Juárez in spite of, or maybe because of, its flaws since, like other frontier heroes, he finds its wilderness freeing and invigorating. He is described as having a “wandering spirit” and “not afraid to go where other Americans never went. At first [...] because he was still in the grip of an addiction, but eventually because he [developed] a taste for the city and its people” (ibid: 168). Furthermore, when Paloma disappears and is found murdered, Kelly is given the opportunity to stand tall and put his honed boxing skills and appetite for what he considers noble fights to good use in order to avenge her.

Indeed, Ciudad Juárez is a space where women disappear, literally, in this case, because of the *feminicidios*. Women are murdered in their hundreds, “all certainly gone and gone forever”

(ibid: 22), and those who are still alive have all lost somebody and are grieving. While Hawken's intention is to condemn the situation, he perforce presents women as victims that need to be rescued or avenged, so the novel re-enacts the classical western scenario in which women figured largely as vulnerable maidens. In a further similarity to classical westerns, women in Ciudad Juárez have no agency since they are unable to bring the *feminicidios* to public notice or to trigger a reaction from the authorities. It is not by chance that the group of women who work for a solution to the *feminicidios* are called *Mujeres Sin Voces* (Women without a Voice)—inspired by the real-life organization *Voces Sin Eco* (Voices without an Echo). Once a month, they dress in black and gather near the Paso del Norte International Bridge. They parade silently along rows of idling cars, carrying banners on sticks to remind “the *turistas* that while they come to Mexico for a party, women are dying” (ibid: 23). In spite of their efforts, the dead women of Juárez remain invisible since “the women in black [cannot] be everywhere, standing silent vigil, forcing the *feminicidios* to surface” (ibid: 202). Their actions are, further, mostly symbolic and do not entail actual investigations by the members of the group into the disappearances and murders; nor do they approach the police. With the drug wars, “everything else is pushed to the side” (ibid: 236), but, even before, the police did not listen since women are expendable in Mexico. The authorities see the murders more as an “embarrassment” than as a problem, so “it was almost a relief when the cartels started killing each other; it took the pressure off” (ibid: 154). All in all, the *Mujeres Sin Voces*, with their black veils framing their faces, become hollow and disembodied “artifact[s], [...] monument[s] to loss and pain” (ibid: 63), haunting the streets of Ciudad Juárez, their voices unheard.

In a context in which nobody cares about the *feminicidios*, and taking into account that Kelly is now personally affected by what happens in Ciudad Juárez, he seems to be fashioned to play the part of the angry avenger and rescuer of damsels in distress we find in so many Hollywood productions. He has the skills, the motivation and even the will. Before Paloma's murder, he did not really care about the *feminicidios*. If anything, he considered them a bother since they had the effect of putting Paloma, a member of *Mujeres Sin Voces*, into a dark mood. When he went jogging, “the numberless flyers demanding *justicia* fluttered as Kelly passed, as if trying to draw his attention away from the silly pursuits and into their world of the dead” (ibid: 32). But the flyers are such a fixture of the urban landscape in Ciudad Juárez that Kelly did not pay attention. Now that Paloma is gone, the flyers draw his eyes, “demanding *justicia*, *justicia*, *justicia* like every time before, but the faces [are] different because he [sees] them now” (ibid: 96). Paloma's murder took place while Kelly, having relapsed, was taking drugs and was lost “inside a needle and swimming in *chinaloa*”, or heroin (ibid: 104). Even if Paloma had called for him, he would have been beyond hearing it. Consequently, Kelly is devastated because of his failure to help her and he takes “his anger and fear and sorrow” to the fields of pink crosses that act as memorials for the women murder victims and prays for “*Justicia para Paloma*” (ibid: 103).

Kelly's anger, however, is wasted in sorrow, self-pity and alcohol. He spends the night after he finds out Paloma has been killed “in an alley sucking at the neck of a tequila bottle” and he feels “like a zombie”, “as dead as Paloma”, “bathed in sweat and reeking of shame” (ibid: 104, 106). To make things worse, he is arrested, accused of having murdered Paloma, and, though his heart races in anger, he feels “drained, not invigorated” (ibid: 111), he “tremble[s]”, cannot “breathe deeply” (ibid: 113) and cries. Once imprisoned, he is subjected to vicious torture to make him confess to the murder, so he spends the nights in prison hurting, his body so sore “his muscles [shriek]” (ibid: 136) when he moves, and he has to make an effort to urinate. He is also haunted by nightmares in which he sees the little boy he killed in the States or Paloma as she was found—raped, mutilated and burnt; he wakes up weeping or soaked in his own urine. His only act of resistance in prison is his refusal to confess to killing Paloma so that the police can close the case and conveniently put the blame on an American drug-fiend who is

not part of the community. His cell mate urges him to confess—“You think you are some kind of tough *hombre*? Believe me, you aren’t so tough as you think” (ibid: 136)—and warns him he will end up dead if he does not comply. Indeed, Kelly is not tough and, even though he is not ultimately killed, he ends up in a coma, hooked up to a respirator.

At this point, the novel subverts the plotline of the classical western since the hero is incapacitated and ousted from the narrative. It also departs from post-classical westerns such as *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976) or *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992). Even though, as Brian Baker explains (2008:133–143), they subvert parts of the Turner myth since their heroes do not nostalgically favour the individual ethos of the frontiersman and do not disavow progress, which they help to advance, in these stories the heroes still resort to violence to right wrongs and avenge injustice. Thus, like their classical counterparts, revisionist westerns still encode “[a] kind of martial or violent masculinity [...] as central to the mythic narrative of the frontier” (ibid: 128).

Hawken’s novel also challenges the Hollywood habits and formulae that apply to the action hero, on whom is systematically inflicted a large number of traumas as part of a process that involves destruction, re-emergence and regeneration. As Susan Jeffords, Yvonne Tasker, Ina Rae Hark and Richard Dyer have pointed out, the suffering white male body as spectacle is part of a tradition spanning centuries of Christian iconography. In action narratives, as in the story of Christ’s ascent after crucifixion, the representation of men in agony is seldom defeatist. The emphasis lies not on pain, but on endurance and resistance, as exemplified in the action films of the eighties and nineties, in which the apparently invincible bodies of Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger are constantly lacerated; yet they always overcome their injuries and go back, with a vengeance, to their mission.

Paul Smith in his article “Eastwood Bound” explains the pleasure and discursive implications of what he calls “the masochistic moment” using Freud’s psychoanalysis. He argues that the pleasure of masochism is not to be found when physical pain is being inflicted, but is rather a deferred pleasure experienced when men regain the power that the masochistic moment deprived them of. According to Smith, therefore, the humiliating lessons of masochism “do not last, they come and are gone, forgotten as part of the subject’s history of struggle in learning how to triumphantly reach symbolic empowerment” (1995: 91). In Smith’s interpretation, the pleasure we obtain from the spectacle of white males going through hell, malaise and abasement is that of seeing them, reptile-like, regenerate their potent bodies, regain control of their lives and of the narrative action, and re-assert their positions of authority and power through a re-activation of their skills in violence.

In the case of Kelly, no such re-empowerment after torment occurs. He is not only banished from the narrative: if he ever wakes up from his coma, he will be maimed for life. Finally, he is superseded by other men who decide to investigate Paloma’s murder and the other deaths and disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez. Significantly, they are Mexican: Rafael Sevilla, an old state policeman who has been following Kelly, hoping he would lead him to bigger drug dealers, and who wants to help Kelly because he thinks he is innocent; and Enrique Palencia, a young local officer, who is revolted by his chief’s—Oscar Garcia, also known as *La Bestia*—use of torture to obtain confessions from innocent suspects. Enrique is described as “either a fool or a romantic” (Hawken 2011: 163) because he still has a conscience and wants to do what he thinks is right, so he decides to help Sevilla in his quest for justice. Sevilla is not, at least at the beginning, the prototypical tough and cynical detective in the hard-boiled tradition. The only point in common he has with the hardboiled detective is that he has to operate outside the official line since his job as a state policeman in charge of stopping the drug wars in Ciudad Juárez precludes him from the investigations into the *feminicidios*, conducted by the local police. Sevilla comes from “a time before the black-clad army of federal police and the barbed wire and the ramparts of concrete steel” (ibid: 191). He is also old, and a drunk

ever since his daughter and granddaughter disappeared and his wife committed suicide. Consequently, he does not belong to the new and dangerous Ciudad Juárez; he is a “ghost [in his own department] passing through [...] the halls from investigation to investigation [...] though it [is] well past his time” (ibid: 266). His energy fails intermittently when he feels overwhelmed by sorrow for his loss and by shame for not having been able to find justice for his daughter and granddaughter, but he is committed and makes good on a pledge to one of the *Mujeres Sin Voces*: “When the time comes I’ll be sure you have a voice. You’ll tell everyone. They will listen” (ibid: 227). Even though he is beaten up once during his investigation, he does not relent and finds out who is behind Paloma’s death: a rich Mexican, Rafa Madrigal, who uses his own son to kidnap women and bring them to an old apartment building where Madrigal and other rich men rape, kill and discard them. Oscar Garcia, *La Bestia*, knows about this and turns a blind eye in exchange for bribes. When Paloma began to suspect Madrigal could be involved, he had her killed. At the end of the novel, Sevilla charges into the apartment building and shoots both Garcia and Madrigal. After that, trembling, crying and hurting physically, he is taken to hospital, where he goes to see Kelly, who has just awoken from his coma, and comforts him when he cries.

Kelly’s expulsion from the action invalidates the idea that it is the role of the white man to intervene in areas regarded as conflict zones which have to be sorted out and ‘normalised’ into democratic and civil societies. Sevilla explains that, in Juárez, “we are always looking for *el extranjero*, the monster we have never seen before who will do us harm, but we hurt ourselves so well [...] we don’t need strangers. We are a city of dead women. We feed on our own” (ibid: 130). However, if Ciudad Juárez’s present malaise is caused by Mexicans, the narrative action also establishes that Mexicans themselves have to find solutions, since Americans are either unresponsive or unable to cure the ills afflicting the city, as is made evident by the fact that, in the novel, American individuals materialise solely as tourists who regard the city as a playground for indulging their craving for sex, drugs and booze and who stick to areas where they can satisfy these cravings. Consequently, they never see—or, rather, want to see—the real Ciudad Juárez of crime, violence, corruption and social disorder.

The novel also shows that the American authorities regard Ciudad Juárez as a contaminated zone that has to be contained—they warn prospective tourists about the dangers they may encounter there, namely “pickpockets and muggers and drug dealers and AIDS” (ibid: 38), and they subject travellers going north to practices that involve “drug-sniffing dogs and mirrors to look beneath frames and endless questions about where [they are] coming from and where [they intend] to go” (ibid: 268). Otherwise, they are only concerned about Ciudad Juárez if the drug wars affect the *maquiladoras* turning out “everything from tote bags to engine parts, mostly for American companies” (ibid: 11). Through the description of how the *maquiladoras* operate, paying criminal wages for hard and boring labour, the true nature of America’s interventionist policies is revealed for what it is, an economic endeavour fueled by greed which, admittedly, guarantees everyone in Ciudad Juárez a job but does not have any effect on the whole country, where people “[get] poorer and living conditions [rot] away with them” (ibid: 11).

Kelly is not associated with the abuse and oppression that the American tourists and the *maquiladoras* denote for Mexicans. Furthermore, he considers Ciudad Juárez his home and finds its harshness re-energising at the beginning. Nevertheless, his whiteness disqualifies him from being fully incorporated into Mexico, so he remains an “outsider” (ibid: 158). His exclusion from the narrative halfway through the story and his replacement by Mexican investigators, therefore, points at a critique of the idea that it is America’s ‘Manifest Destiny’ to intervene in problem zones and make them better, something the novel suggests is only set in motion if American economic interests are endangered. Further, however, Kelly’s narrative eviction and his inability to re-surface after his physical ordeal are significant in terms of

gender, since Hawken not only denies his protagonist the rebirth that follows torment and debasement in so many westerns and other traditionally male-centred genres, he also invalidates the frontier and the wilderness as liberating provinces where white men can test their manly attributes of aggression and domination. In the inimical world of the frontier, the hero has to defeat adversity to become a ‘real man’; he has to “fight to defend the innocent from villainous outlaws, fight off the attacks by indigenous tribes, subdue the harsh wilderness and bring it under human control” (Adams 2015: 170). In Hawken’s novel, instead, the frontier defeats Kelly, swallows him up and ultimately spits him out, broken and paralysed. Hawken, in fact, describes Ciudad Juárez, as a “hard wind off the desert” which “cut[s] stone and slice[s] away the soft parts of a man until there [is] nothing but sharp edges and an underlying brittleness that an unexpected blow [can] shatter” (2011: 168). Indeed, Kelly’s incursion into the wilderness of Ciudad Juárez delivers such a blow, and his re-hardened body is shattered as a result.

Conclusion: The Defeating Frontier

Kelly’s destruction, paralysis and removal from the frontier result from personal flaws, but his incapacitation has wider implications if we take into account the fact that there are many other texts that confront men with the wilderness/frontier just to have them beaten by it, even when, unlike Kelly, they do actually fight, which suggests that, in the end, the violent masculinity connected with the frontier is nothing but destructive. If we consider the television series mentioned before, the pattern is quite consistent. In *Deadwood*, Wild Bill Hickok (Keith Carradine) is the prototypical western gunman hero who used to shoot his way into celebrity and recognition, but he is aged, ailing and supernumerary; his death in the series does not just respond to historical facts, but acts as a prelude to the demise of old forms of masculinity that have to be replaced by newer, more adaptable types as civilisation finally overtakes the Deadwood community. The law also catches up with Vic Mackey in *The Shield* and Walter White in *Breaking Bad*: Vic is not imprisoned because of his crimes but he ends up caged in, anyway, relegated to office work in an asphyxiating cubicle; Walter is hit by a stray bullet from his own contraption while protecting his erstwhile partner, Jesse, in the final shootout. Two of the protagonists of *Fargo*’s second season follow Vic and Walter’s fate: Ed Blumquist (Jesse Plemons) is killed during a shootout; Mike Milligan (Bokeem Woodbine) ends his days in an office. Both had adopted violence as a way of life: Milligan to go up the ladder in the criminal organisation he works for, and Blumquist, prompted by his wife, to escape the routine and stagnation of small-town life. In *Dexter*, the protagonist is granted a frontier scenario to end his days, but it is a self-inflicted exile because he thinks his murderous instincts will destroy his lover and son if he continues with them; he is already responsible for his sister’s death.⁴

In the stories considered in this article, to conclude, the violence of the frontier hero is self-defeating and, rather than regeneration, the adherents of the myth barely achieve survival. While contemporary narratives like *The Dead Women of Juárez* may still nostalgically recreate

⁴ *Jericho* does not challenge the frontier myth, presenting as it does a masculinist ethos where men can regain a sense of power through the exercise of violence. Interestingly, its dystopian point of departure leads to an imagining of a utopian community that can start anew in a pre-technological, pre-capitalist world. Consequently, it is the only series among those considered here that departs from realist portrayals of past and present times and conjures up a whimsical future society in which men and women adopt traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. This does not mean that the series does not contemplate the negative effects of violence: indeed, the patriarch and leader of the Jericho community, Johnston Green (Gerald McRaney), is killed as a result of post-apocalyptic violence. Admittedly, the Jericho men do not abhor violence after Johnston’s death but, at least, the logic of revenge is progressively undermined as Johnston’s sons learn that, if things are to work better for the Jericho community, they have to rely on cooperation rather than on anger.

the myth of the frontier and its promise of regeneration through violence, they expose the fact that the aggression required to inhabit the myth will, at best, merely grant crisis-ridden white men a short respite from what they regard as the asphyxiating constraints of present life, but will not guarantee salvation in the long run. Even though this destruction-by-frontier plot in Hawken's novel and other frontier stories entails a critique of a hegemonic form of violent masculinity, these narratives do not attempt to re-write masculinity in order to accommodate soft spots in the hero's armour. However, at any rate, they address the sterility and devastating potential of a myth that transports men to nostalgic spaces and past forms of masculinity rather than compel them to confront the present and adapt in order to meet the challenges of new social conditions that demand redefinitions of masculinity based on the incorporation of new (feminine) attributes. Whether these 'New Men' can be fashioned as heroes in a culture in which the lonesome cowboy is still a national icon and a prototype of heroic masculinity is yet unclear.⁵ Meanwhile, at least, texts like Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* teach men who try to find relief in the wilderness, or their wilderness, to escape the asphyxia and alienation of contemporary times that myths ultimately "reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living" (Slotkin 1973: 5). Such men should learn from these texts and look into the future instead of doggedly seeking new frontiers to stage old forms of masculinity.

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⁵ It is symptomatic that, in Hawken's novel, the white hero is superseded by a man of a different ethnic origin, Sevilla, but not by a different type of man. Sevilla, after all, has to resort to violence to avenge Paloma's death and find those responsible for her and other women's murders.

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Drum-Taps: Whitman's Problematic Legacy as a War Poet

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Walt Whitman's American Civil War poems in his collection *Drum-Taps* in comparison with the poetry written by British soldier-poets of WWI. These poems present Whitman as a problematic model for future generations of war poets since he hardly ever questions the meaninglessness of bloodshed in the battlefield, a trait which is almost a defining characteristic of WWI poetry, anti-war poems that question and criticize bloodshed rather than celebrating it. Whitman the poet encourages people to take part in the war without making it clear what one is supposed to fight for or against. His poems divest individuals of their personality and turn them into parts of the war machine. The poems in *Drum-Taps* depend heavily on the use of visual images that suggest distance, while his British successors opt for a variety of images that imply proximity. Whitman's poetry suggests lack of involvement since he was not a soldier-poet, which to some extent renders him a questionable role model for future poets. Therefore, though some of his elegiac pieces may serve as models for future poets, Whitman's legacy as a war poet on the whole poses a problem for his British antecedents with its artistic, ethical and political implications.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, war poetry, WWI British poets, tradition

Introduction

Nineteenth-century American literati were concerned with establishing the identity of America through works of art, especially literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman believed that the true voice of the new nation could be found by focusing on the here and the now, rather than imitating the voices of past examples and remote cultures. Whitman treated poetry as a decisive criterion in the definition of a nation, declaring “the topmost proof of a race is its own born poetry”¹ (“Poetry To-Day,” p. 1014) and adding that no imitative attempt to concoct poetry would secure America a distinctive voice. He himself became the true voice (“native expresser,” p. 1014) born from the bosom of America with an all-embracing attitude; his use of free verse was a revolutionary and liberating move for poets for future generations.

However, his poems about the American Civil War in *Drum-Taps* fall short of presenting a dependable model for future war poets in terms of their attitude and tone. The poet in these poems is an observer, and to a great extent remains so, which is evident in the predominance of visual images in his coverage of the war and the fact that his treatment of the Civil War in many cases verges on reportage. This visual approach corresponds to the pictorial, the picturesque and even the pastoral in some poems, where the poet adopts the role of a painter or a photographer taking snapshots of the battlefield or troops of soldiers in a mellifluous framing. Such qualities render Whitman as a problematic model for the tradition of war poetry, especially British war poets of WWI.

War Poetry: A Brief Clarification

War poetry is a vast genre, from the Homeric wars to the Gulf War, from Romantics to twentieth-century, from the jingoistic to the protest. The term as used in this paper refers to poems dealing with WWI from a critical viewpoint that treat war as something destructive and antagonistic to human nature, rather than presenting it as an event to be celebrated.

One of the key elements that differentiated WWI poetry was the fact that it was composed mostly by poets who took an active part in the war. “Men such as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, David Jones, Ivor Gurney, and Siegfried Sassoon wrote about what they experienced firsthand” (Jensen, 2012, p. 3). This is in a sense one of the dividing lines between Whitman, who was not a soldier, and the WWI poets, most of whom fought in the trenches and directly observed and experienced the atrocities of war. Whitman’s experience of the war was limited to nursing and helping the wounded soldiers in New York and Washington, D.C. In fact this does not amount to an excuse for writing war poems from a distanced and uninvolved vantage point since there are other authors such as Herman Melville, who did not take part in the war, and Stephen Crane, who was born after the Civil War. Both Melville and Crane composed poetry and prose on the Civil War with a critical eye that could appeal to later generations of poets.

Secondly, with WWI, poets felt a rift between depicting war in an artistic way, as poetic subject matter, and the sense of guilt arising from their belief that they had turned tragedy into esthetics. As Kendall pithily states, war poetry catches the soldier-poet in the double-bind of making an aesthetic product out of an unaesthetic/horrific experience (2007, p. 1). This is far from what poets in preceding centuries felt.

Another significant characteristic of poetry of the Great War is the change of attitude toward war. With the introduction of technology onto the battlefield that facilitated mass killing, war ceased to be expressed in heroic or laudatory terms. Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of*

¹ All Whitman quotations are taken from W. Whitman (1984), *Poetry and Prose*, New York: The Library of America.

Courage (1895), “the first non-romantic novel of the Civil War” (Stallman, 1960, p. viii), is a realistic work that expresses this change in the way wars are fought. Crane reveals this transformation through the inner thoughts of his protagonist Henry Fleming:

He had long despaired of witnessing a Greeklike struggle. Such would be no more, he had said. Men were better, or more timid. Secular and religious education had effaced the throat-grappling instinct, or else firm finance held in check the passions. (1960, p. 13)

Much like the way Crane focused on the unheroic aspects of war in his novel, the poets of the Great War questioned the meaning of war. In this sense, Crane, who also wrote the ironically charged anti-war poem “War is Kind” (1996, p. 1325), can be seen as one of the precursors and role models of WWI poets.

Glancy notes that “[a]n ironic or cynical view of war ... became a central thread of war poetry, especially in the poems written during World War I, when most of the British poems about war were written” (2002, p. 258). Despite the fact that early war-poetry anthologies sought to highlight the courage and glory of the “Tommies,” or British soldiers, the idea of fighting as a heroic game or sport faded after the Battle of the Somme in 1916 (Hibberd and Onions, 1994, pp. 3, 11). Even in the voice of chauvinistic poets one can hear the bitterness of war (see for example “My Boy Jack” by the Victorian poet Rudyard Kipling (2013, p. 148), a defender of compulsory military service).

And most importantly, WWI poetry is a poetry of protest. In the words of Das, “War poetry, as represented by a small group of ‘anti-war’ soldier-poets, has come to dominate First World War memory” (2013, p. 4). Wilfred Owen was one of those poets realizing that “killing was wrong” (Silkin, 1981, p. 21). In the 1918 “Preface” to his collected poems, which he hoped to see published, Owen succinctly summarizes his views on war poetry:

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty,
dominion, or power, except War.
Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the
next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.
(1965, p. 31)

Campbell similarly observes Owen’s centrality in war poetry:

The poetry from Britain and Ireland which was written about the wars in which those countries engaged—imperial and civil wars as well as the world wars—is a poetry which no longer feels that it can sing in celebration of arms and the man, but rather must turn to Wilfred Owen’s theme, the ‘pity of war’ or its absurdity. (2003, p. 65)

Therefore, Wilfred Owen, among others, can be treated as a war poet par excellence, taking issue with patriotic discourses that endorsed heroic action in war.

WWI poets searched for models, which tended more to be their Romantic precursors such as Keats and Shelley, as in the case of Owen. To what extent WWI poets read Whitman is difficult to conjecture. If we bear in mind that Whitman was the practitioner of free verse and that WWI poets did not discard poetic conventions, indeed relying on, if not totally depending on, pre-established forms (for example the sonnet) and rhyme, Whitman as a role model sounds outlandish. However, Longley in her article “The Great War, History, and the English Lyric” quotes Isaac Rosenberg, who saw Whitman as a considerably significant poetic precursor: “The

Homer for this war has yet to be found—Whitman got very near the mark 50 years ago with ‘Drum Taps’” (2005, p. 65). This suggests that Whitman was among the poetic models that British soldier-poets read if not emulated. Therefore, a comparison of Whitman with poets of WWI can contribute to the elucidation of the continuities, rifts, influences and inspirations between war poetry in nineteenth-century America and early-twentieth-century England.

Whitman’s War Poems

The poems in *Drum-Taps* and those in the *Sequel to Drum-Taps* were written during the Civil War but printed in 1865 in New York. The original title of the book was *Walt Whitman’s Drum-Taps* (Olivier, 2006, p.18).

After the outbreak of the Civil War, when hundreds of injured and dying soldiers were being shipped to the New York hospitals on a contract basis with the army, [Whitman] visited many of them and listened to their accounts of the military actions in which they had participated. And, in at least a couple of instances, he wove elements of their stories into the poems he incorporated into the seventy-two-page collection of war poems that he published in 1865 as *Drum-Taps*. For more than two critical years, during the war and after, Whitman served as a volunteer visitor in Washington’s military hospitals, where he befriended ailing and dying soldiers, comforting them, bringing them the small gifts and items they requested, writing letters for them, sometimes nursing them, and even intervening on their behalf with the medical staff. (Aspiz, 2004, pp. 161–162)

Drum-Taps, which differed from his previous poems, with their shocking implications of sexuality and homo-eroticism, was welcome by readers who supported the Union; however, Whitman’s artistic execution met with disapproval from certain critics. For example, both Henry James (2008) and William Dean Howells (2008) wrote disparagingly about Whitman’s war poems on the grounds that they were expressions of artless, prosaic pathos. There are three main aspects of Whitman’s war poems where his work does not prove to be a model for WWI poets: celebration of war by means of eulogizing, abundant use of visual imagery that creates a sense of distancing, and lack of involvement. These three issues may occasionally overlap; therefore, they are not treated as completely distinct and isolated areas.

1. Euphoria Verging on Jingoism

The opening poem in *Drum-Taps* called “First O Songs for a Prelude” is a highly apostrophic poem describing Manhattan as the venue of a spontaneous upsurge of recruitment and preparation for war. According to Aspiz, the poem “displays a patriotic zeal bordering on jingoism for the fevered spirit of war preparations and expresses [Whitman’s] desire to become the war’s poet” (2004, p. 165). This wave of exuberance in the poem seems to be fuelled by the speaker’s encouragement, due to which the atmosphere changes from the artistic and peaceful to the belligerent:

How you sprang—how you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand,
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead[.]
(p. 416)

Reminiscent of his cataloguing technique encapsulating people from all walks of life in his *Song of Myself*, the poem lists people following the drum beats: young men, mechanics, blacksmiths, drivers, salesmen, and others embrace the war. At the same time, however, the poem erases people’s individual traits, turning them into anonymous automata produced in the assembly-line of the war machine. Through the end of the poem the militarization of the inhabitants of Manhattan is almost complete: the civilians are transformed into soldiers, women into nurses. Whitman’s exaltation focuses more on their dusty garments, their knapsacks, and

the weapons they use rather than the would-be soldiers themselves: “And the sturdy artillery, / The guns bright as gold, the work for giants, to serve well the guns” (p. 418).² The poem is in the heroic mode, eulogizing war without even justifying it or identifying the threat or the enemy. In another poem in this book, “From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird,” Whitman almost explicitly adopts an apolitical attitude without taking sides with any of the fighting forces, as he desires to “sing the idea of all” (p. 420), flying like a bird and observing all the states regardless of whether they are abolitionists or defenders of slavery. His aim is to foreground the idea of unity: “The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable” (p. 420). In twentieth-century terms poems such as “First O Songs for a Prelude” could be defined as jingoistic or propaganda works zealously supporting and advertising the necessity of war.

Whitman’s contemporary Herman Melville (2000) also wrote poems about war in his *Battle-Pieces*. Some of Melville’s poems too describe the glorious parade of soldiers at around the same time when Whitman wrote his first war poems. However, Melville, unlike Whitman, here approached the Civil War with a critical eye, expressing his conviction about destructive aspects of the war in such poems as “The March into Virginia” (p. 58) and “Ball’s Bluff” (p. 61). In the former, for instance, Melville expresses the joyous atmosphere: young soldiers march gleefully into the battle as if they were going berry-picking or having a picnic:

The banners play, the bugles call,
The air is blue and prodigal.
...
All they feel is this: ’tis glory,
A rapture sharp, though transitory,
Yet lasting in belaued story.
So they gayly go to fight,
Chatting left and laughing right. (p. 58)

However, his attitude and tone differ from Whitman’s in terms of the critical projection that is full of warning about the outcomes of the war. For Melville, who is categorically critical of wars, “All wars are boyish, and fought by boys”, and the young soldiers are unaware of the maiming and destructive outcomes of the war that devours them like Moloch, the Biblical god associated with child sacrifice:

But some who this blithe mood present,
As on in lightsome files they fare,
Shall die experienced ere three days be spent—
Perish, enlightened by the vollied glare;
Or shame survive, and, like to adamant,
Thy after shock, Manassas, share. (pp. 58–59)

Whitman does not mention the destruction of soldiers in his poems; on the contrary, he presents war as something desired collectively. “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” written from the viewpoint of Poet, Pennant, Child, and Father, each of whom sings their individual songs, exemplifies such poems. Yet despite its quadripartite structure, the poem does not harbor a pluralistic outlook; on the contrary it aims at presenting the univocal message of the grandeur and nobility of the war. The poem opens with the words of the poet: “O a new song, a free

² Such treatment of weapons, machinery, and guns heralds, in a sense, the Futurism of Marinetti, who praised machines, war, and the individual. When the poem is treated on its own and without any reference to its historical context it would read as a Futuristic poem, though it does not dwell on the individual but a mass of people in which the singularities of soldiers are deliberately silenced.

song, / “Flapping, flapping, flapping, flapping, by sounds, by voices clearer” (p. 420). The song is so pervasive with its booming plosive sound that it rivals the drums; given a voice, the song becomes a human-like entity, a producer of signs and discourse rather than a mere sound. The same attitude is applied to the wind, the drums and the banner, each voicing words to the same effect; thus, through these items the militaristic content becomes obvious.

The poet-speaker in this poem defines himself as a man of action rather than words, which he defiantly belittles:

Words! book-words! what are you?
Words no more, for hearken and see,
My song is there in the open air, and I must sing,
With the banner and pennant a-flapping. (p. 421)

His preference for such a declaration is not accidental at all since he invites everyone in a Dionysian frenzy to rejoice the glamour of the war:

I’ll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy,
Then loosen, launch forth, to go and compete,
With the banner and pennant a-flapping. (p. 421)

The sagacious child in *Song of Myself* with his question “What is grass?” is transformed into someone that endorses the belligerent situation. He is indoctrinated about or at least made to believe in the sublime meaning of the banner, the war, and its all-encompassing value: “It is so broad it covers the whole sky” (p. 422). Thus, the child comes to believe in the all-pervasive existence of war, which he accepts as natural and right.

Such treatment of war is far from the poetry of WWI poets, who questioned, resisted, and protested the butchery they witnessed and the jingoism that fed the war. Siegfried Sassoon’s (2013) poem “They,” for instance, plainly expresses the meaninglessness of fighting, no matter how lofty it sounds, since it ushers in devastating outcomes:

“For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.” (p. 64)

One should, however, bear in mind that British poets fought against foreigners in distant lands, while Whitman the civilian poet found himself in the middle of a civil war. In other words, it was not as easy for him as it was for poets of the Great War to talk about the bloodshed in unfavorable terms or to openly support one side, since both parties in the Civil War belonged to the same nation.

2. Visual Imagery as a Means of Distancing

One of the hallmarks of Whitman’s war poems is his tendency to present war in picturesque terms; these poems I shall call tableaux poems. In “Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” “Bivouac on a Mountain Side,” and a couple of other poems, Whitman relies on the descriptive mode, taking a series of snapshots of army forces, depicting them moving peacefully rather than engaged in battle. Especially “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” paints a pastoral picture of a mounted troop without any reference to warfare. Edna Longley observes that the pastoral is a genre replete with opposites and that war poetry can contain the pastoral and vice versa (2007, pp. 461, 462). Indeed, WWI poets employed pastoral elements but along with reference to the maiming

outcomes of the war. For instance, “As the team’s head brass” by Edward Thomas opens with a rural setting highly suggestive of the pastoral. Plowing animals, lovers enjoying themselves, trees, and other details imply a tranquil atmosphere:

As the team’s head-brass flashed out on the turn
 The lovers disappeared into the wood.
 I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
 That strewed an angle of the fallow, and
 Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
 Of charlock. (p. 52)

However, the poem loses its peaceful tone and turns ominous from this point onwards as the speaker begins conversing about the ongoing war. The pastoral serves only as a means to talk about the destructive aspects of the war rather than ignoring them.

Whitman’s “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” is a pastoral poem written in the second year of the Civil War (1862); however, it does not refer to the war setting at all. The soldiers who are nearing and slowly crossing a ford are observed from a distant, bird’s-eye view. They move slowly and gracefully, their serpentine course giving them a naturalistic and reptilian ease. The poem is interwoven with visual images, drawing less on other sensory impressions:

A LINE in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
 They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun—hark to the musical clank,
 Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink,
 Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a
 picture, the negligent rest on the saddles,
 Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford—while,
 Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
 The guidon flags flutter gayly in the wind. (p. 435)

The detailed presentation of the scene depends primarily on visual description through the use of colors (green, silvery, brown, scarlet, blue, white), metaphors (“serpentine course”) verbs pertaining to movement (wind, take, flash, emerge, enter, flatter) and two auditory images (“musical clang” and horses splashing). The verbs denoting movement should not lead one to think that this is like a movie action scene, because the observer-poet is in fact describing different actions performed by different agents in different parts of the scene. They are in a sense motionless, as Whitman himself says: “each person a picture, the negligent rest on the saddles.” There is an atmosphere of tranquility and serenity in the way the troop is described. One gets the impression that this is not army but a band of hunters enjoying themselves on an idle outing, immortalized by the brush strokes of a painter. The third-to-last line ends in enjambment and introduces the final image of the flags fluttering happily in the wind. Whitman’s stance is ambivalent since it is difficult to decide whether the poem presents war in positive terms or expresses a yearning for times of peace.

WWI poets’ experiences in the trenches left almost no room for poems relying purely on visual impressions, their being filled in by other sensory impressions. Das argues that

the visual topography of everyday life was replaced by the tactile geography of the trenches: in the dark, subterranean world of the Western Front, men navigated space not through reassuring distance of the gaze but through the tactile immediacy of their bodies. (2013, p. 10)

For example, “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen employs a wide variety of images, rather than depending on visual images only:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori. (1965, p. 55)

The poem harbors almost all the sensory impressions (kinesthetic, auditory, gustatory, as well as visual) and foregrounds the nightmarish details of the soldier dying in a gas attack. Such engagement of various senses is effective in creating a feel of immediacy.

Likewise, “Bivouac on a Mountain Side” presents an army encampment in a quasi-pastoral manner. The poem compares camp-fires to “eternal stars” (p. 435), implying how sacred fighting for these soldiers is, or that they will attain a superhuman standing when they die. WWI poets sometimes do have recourse to the pastoral; however, when they do so there is an accompanying sense of irony, tension, and foreboding. In Rosenberg’s “Returning, we hear the Larks,” written in 1917, for instance, the song of the larks acts as a brief and out-of-place interlude to the soldiers’ walk to death (2013, p. 87). In short, Whitman’s voyeuristic and distanced gaze was not totally appealing to and satisfactory for his future British fellow poets.

3. Lack of Involvement

Unlike soldier-poets such as Sassoon or Owen, Whitman worked as a nurse upon finding out that his brother had been wounded in battle during the Civil War. Some of his poems are based on his observations and experiences in the hospitals. As an outsider, Whitman the poet naturally has the uninvolved and relatively distanced attitude of an onlooker. In the narrative poem “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” formulated as it is like the impressions of a museum visitor, the speaker relates his experience of seeing soldiers treated in a church that is serving as a hospital. The wounded, delineated as “these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the floor,” attest to Whitman’s tendency to see things *en masse*, rather than individually. Only when a wounded soldier becomes the focus of attention does he temporarily gain the aspect of an individual:

At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is
 shot in the abdomen,)
 I stanch the blood temporarily (the youngest’s face is white as a lily,)
 Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o’er the scene fain to absorb it all[.] (p. 440)

These lines are an example of Whitman’s unwavering tendency in *Leaves of Grass* to observe multitudes without getting involved in what they are doing. Whatever he observes he never fails to praise the people or things he confronts; in the same poem Whitman compares another soldier who has just died to Christ: “Dead and divine brother of all, and here again he lies” (p. 441). This leads one to think that Whitman treats the fallen soldiers as Christ-like figures who sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the new American nation. The war provides, therefore,

the locus of a recurrent and mythical theme of self-sacrifice. Whitman in a sense celebrates the idea of martyrdom of individuals for the sake of a cause.

What differentiates Whitman from his future fellow poets is his penchant for treating life and death, war and peace, funeral march and joyful tune as equally pleasing. In “To a Certain Civilian” he makes his point clear, by advising a critic of his poetry to “lull” himself with “piano tunes” since “I have been born of the same as the war was born, / The drum-corps’ rattle is ever to me sweet music, I love well the martial dirge” (p. 455). This is to some extent unsurprising since Whitman extols himself as a poet encompassing all, embracing all aspects of existence, irrespective of any contradictions involved. In Chant 51 of his *Song of Myself*, he defiantly declares: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (p. 246). Likewise, in *Drum-Taps* the Civil War is transformed into a casual event in Whitman’s all-inclusive democratic outlook; it becomes another scene he savors, whether it be twenty-eight naked men bathing in the water, a child asking what is grass, a fugitive slave looking for shelter, a woman waiting, or people working.

However, Whitman is not always an implicit advocate of war machinery or the de-individualization of soldiers. He is also skillful at adopting an elegiac mode in such poems as “Come Up from the Fields Father” (pp. 436–438) and “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” (pp. 438–439). Both poems deal with the anguish of the death of a son, the former related by a messenger, the latter by a father. Both are rare in Whitman’s poetry in that they are narrative poems. In “Come Up from the Fields Father” the dead soldier’s family members are delivered the devastating message. Ironically, the time of the year is autumn, the harvest time when apple trees are laden with fruit to be picked, in contrast to the grim harvest of the young soldier’s life:

Lo, ’tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio’s villages with leaves fluttering in the moderate wind,
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis’d vines,
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?) (p. 436)

It is interesting to note that in this poem Whitman does not rely on the distance created by his dependence on visual images. The poem is stylistically rich and uses lyrical as well as dramatic and novelistic techniques; it swerves from direct address to observation to narrative and finally to a projection about the mother’s future condition. Whitman’s elegy is a forerunner of Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” though lacking its compactness and directly bitter treatment of the subject. However, the number of such poems in *Drum-Taps* is meager and does not salvage Whitman from being a dubious model for later poets.

Conclusion

One of the poems in *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” may place Whitman in the war-poetry pantheon. It is an elegy written in memory of Abraham Lincoln, who was shot dead at the end of the Civil War. Like “Come Up from the Fields Father,” “Lilacs” is a poem where Whitman manages to express the pathos of the war. However, “Lilacs” is a national poem, serving, if not particularly designed, to support the idea of the nation. Nor is it a war poem in the strictest meaning of the term. Yet, as Aspiz rightly observes, it introduces the president’s demise as a collective death that encapsulates all the war victims: “The Lincoln of Whitman’s poem is an abstract national hero, the first among equals, representative of the legion of the dead who were felled in a sacred war that the poem never

names—a war without geography or historical details or place names, as though its locus were the poet's own 'dreams' projections'" (2004, p. 192). Whitman's elegy on Lincoln refers to the war victims in section 15:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd. (p. 166)

The way Whitman presents them is disturbingly graphic: countless decomposing bodies scattered in the open, or thrown into mass graves. Once again it can be said that Whitman depends on the use of visual images when he talks about war. The purpose of the stanza is to assuage the sense of catastrophe and destruction for the sake of the Union. To his way of thinking, the dead soldiers are content to have died for the national cause. In a sense, the individual soldier is sacrificed for the high ideal of the collective identity.

As a follower of Transcendentalism, Whitman believed in the power of the individual, but his conception of the individual was like that of the grass: existing in multitudes, having hardly any features to distinguish him or her in the democratic crowd, which is a mass of people and entities with equal traits. His reaction to life and death was likewise democratic and equalizing, divesting them of their differences, making them cohere as components of a cosmic cycle, each following and complementing one another.

Whitman wrote about the war, yet, unlike WWI poets, he did not antagonize the enemy or question the necessity of the war. Nor does he present bloodshed as a problematic issue. The way Yeats reacted to the Irish problem roughly half a century later in his "Easter, 1916" (1996, pp. 180–182), for example, is missing in Whitman's treatment of the domestic crisis. Yeats handles the Easter Uprising in such a way as to render it both a tragic and commendable act, as the use of oxymoron suggests in the poem: "A terrible beauty is born" (p. 180), or "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (p. 181). Whitman, however, does not interpret the Civil War in oxymoronic terms that might suggest a personal involvement. This is to a great extent because of his all-embracing attitude. In the words of D. H. Lawrence, who jocularly impersonates Whitman's poetic ego, "I am everything and everything is me and so we're all One Identity, like the Mundane Egg, which has been addled quite a while" (1983, p. 173). In Whitman's poetry the particular is incorporated into the general. "Different voices are lost in or drowned out by *the* voice, awkward plurality is subsumed into singleness" (Simpson, 2013, p. 184; original emphasis). And here lies one of the major problems that Whitman's poetry creates for war poets in the twentieth century, who did not readily view war with the eyes of a Transcendentalist.

Whitman embraces the idea of war as a festive event, which makes his poetry akin to jingoism. His war poetry turns a blind eye on the individual soldier's agonies for the sake of the nation's survival. Thus the individual becomes something that can be easily sacrificed. Even when he seems to be focusing on the individual, his poetry distances through the use of visual imagery. These traits render his work incompatible with the poetry of WWI poets.

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Celebrating the Power of Literature in African Development

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Abstract

The late South African author Lewis Nkosi described history as a hero in African literature in his critical text *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981). In this paper I argue for the reverse: that African literature is not only a hero in Africa but also a powerful proactive force in the continent's development. This function of literature is rarely acknowledged yet the subject constitutes the academic arm of the continent's struggles against various forces. Colonialists recognised the essence of literature as a tool for deconstructing African culture and identity. African writers and political leaders from various vantage points also recognised its centrality in the decolonisation process. Therefore a comprehensive history of Africa, particularly in the last half century, must take cognisance of the contribution made by literary artists and texts.

Keywords: African literature, postcolonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

We writers and critics of African Literature should form an essential intellectual part of the anti-imperialist cultural army of African peoples for total economic and political liberation from imperialism and foreign domination.

– Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1981: 31

Nigeria's many cultural treasures stretch back to the Benin Empire—and your literature, poetry and arts guide us to this day. We read it in the words of literary giants like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. We see it in the drama and excitement of products from Nollywood. We hear it in rhythms from juju to afrobeat to Dbanj, Davido and Wizkid!

– UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon, Abuja, Nigeria, 24 August, 2015 (emphasis added)

We aspire that by 2063: Pan-African ideals will be fully embedded in all school curricula and Pan-African cultural assets (heritage, folklore, language, film, music, theatre, literature, festivals, religions and spirituality) will be enhanced. The African creative arts ... will be celebrated throughout the continent, as well as in the diaspora and contribute significantly to self-awareness, well-being and prosperity, and to world culture and heritage. African languages will be the basis for administration and integration. African values of family, community, hard work, merit, mutual respect and social cohesion will be firmly entrenched.

– African Union Agenda 2063, Articles 41–42

In his critical text *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981), Lewis Nkosi described history as a hero in African literature. In this paper I argue for the reverse: that African literature is not only an unsung hero in African history but also a powerful proactive force in the continent's development. After many years of being in a thankless position it is gratifying to note that the African Union now acknowledges the essence of literary and other arts as forming Africa's entire cultural heritage in national and global development. The contribution made by African literary arts in particular constitutes the academic arm of the continent's multifaceted struggles from time immemorial. As the outgoing UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon notes in the comment above, literary arts have guided humanity for centuries. In traditional Africa the literary artist was the custodian of cultural knowledge and was trusted to impart it to many generations. His/her relationship with society was generally harmonious. The society rewarded his/her service by catering for his/her basic needs. The status of the literary artist-connoisseur has not changed. What seems to have changed is the relationship with society. In contemporary Africa writers bear many pet names that signify their essence and power in the society, such as "artist the ruler", "oracle of the people", "self-ordained priest", "novelist the teacher" and "voice of conscience". A comprehensive history of African development in the last half century in particular must of necessity take cognisance of the contribution made by creative artists and texts.

Since the 1950s many African counties have had political leaders who doubled as poets, such as Leopold Sedar Senghor and Agostino Neto, and essayists and autobiographers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Oginga Odinga and Nelson Mandela. There have been political writers and lovers of literature such as Julius Nyerere, to cite just one example. Senghor, the first president of Senegal, retained his poet-cum-politician identity throughout his life. He viewed both fields as expressions of the same African protest against politico-cultural imperialism. His ideology of negritude was realised through both fields. Agostinho Neto, the first president of independent Angola, was also a poet-cum-politician. He started writing poetry in the 1940s and continued in the fifties and sixties during the difficult years, along with his activism against

Portuguese colonialism in his country. In his foreword to Neto's *Sacred Hope* (1974), Basil Davidson summarises Neto's poetry thus:

Chants of sorrow, these are also songs of joy. Poems of departure, they are also poems of arrival. They are highly political writings but their message has nothing to do with the machinery of politics, and even less, if that were possible, with the empty political propaganda. If they are political poems, then they are political in the sense that Shelley wrote political poems, in the sense that Brecht wrote political poems. (Neto, 1974: xiii)

Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, was an essayist with a keen eye on the function of the arts and literature in particular within the process of colonisation and consequently within decolonisation. Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967) and Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk To Freedom* (1965) speak of different levels of oppression but also demonstrate deep hope for complete freedom.

Among the first generation of political leaders of independent Africa, Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, ranks high among those who understood the philosophy and potential power of literature. He knew when to exploit and contain its power. As a believer in Marxism he presumed the function of literature as being a strong tool for influencing people. His deep understanding of the discipline is exemplified in his translation of three of William Shakespeare's plays into Kiswahili, the local/national language in his country. Nyerere encouraged the arts in many ways. Unlike Nyerere, the political leaders around him appreciated literature only when it served an overt propagandist function in their favour, opposing it when it became critical of their actions.

Not all independent African countries had leaders who supported the arts. Some leaders were indeed threatened by the power of the text. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was detained by Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president. It is ironic that the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation established an annual prize for literature in 1974, and even more so the fact that wa Thiong'o met Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo's son, when wa Thiong'o came to Kenya from exile to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his first book *Weep Not Child* (1965). Wa Thiong'o started writing during his undergraduate programme at Makerere University in neighbouring Uganda. Since then he has written extensively, his works including novels, short stories, plays, essays, autobiography, literary criticism and other critical texts. After detention he was forced into exile, where he has lived and continues to write to the present. A number of Kenyan writers such as the late Wahome Mutahi were to follow, particularly during the reign of the second president, Daniel Arap Moi, which ran from 1978 to 2002. Micere Mugo, the leading Kenyan female writer, for example, was forced to go into exile and even lost her Kenyan citizenship.

From the 1950s to the present Africa has produced a long list of literary artists who have engaged the African experience through prose fiction, poetry, drama and theatre, film, and practical criticism. In many cases the artists have challenged the power of some of the post-independence political rulers who became dictators or advanced neo-colonialism and paid heavily for their audacity with imprisonment, exile and even death. Their crime is often summarised euphemistically as treason. In retrospect such 'treason' can now be viewed as valid knowledge and truth rooted in critical thinking with the ultimate aim of structural social transformation. As Terry Eagleton concludes, literature is "deeply subversive" mainly because artists are "trained to imagine alternatives to the actual" (2008: 833). The censoring political rulers understand the potential of literature and exploit or punish it in equal measure. Interestingly, few African scholars in other disciplines, particularly the sciences, have been subjected to similar victimisation. That notwithstanding, literature is generally undervalued and relegated to the margins of verifiable knowledge since it is neither scientific nor technological. At the surface level its entertainment function tends to subsume the didactic. In modern Africa, unlike traditional Africa, literary artists are either victimised or abandoned to a pauper's

existence. Fortunately their creations are timeless and enrich readers' understanding of many aspects of human experience including the concept of development.

In contemporary discourse in Africa, development is generally perceived in economic terms as the process of material production and creation of commensurate ideas, policies, structures and institutions, with the ultimate aim of solving practical problems of poverty, ignorance and disease in order to change a country from developing (read under-developing) to developed status. The developed world that prescribes development strategies emphasises science and technology, starting from the education system and subsequently spreading into other areas of daily experience. Educational institutions are established on this basis. Hence the multiplication of institutes of technology-something-or-other, rarely institutes of literature and literary studies, history, anthropology, philosophy or sociology. Even though such courses are included in the school curricula, they are generally viewed as subsidiary. Before the 1970s, many of the literature courses taught in school systems in many African countries excluded African literature. Little research was done in this discipline. In developmental language, research denotes investigative activities that yield solutions to practical problems. Research in the humanities is generally not given priority in the development agenda. There are many other signifiers of this deification of science versus reification of the arts. Yet everyday experiences are shaped by both discipline categories as sources of knowledge.

Although there is no explicit dismissal of the knowledge in the humanities, especially literature, in Africa, there is equally no explicit acclamation of the non-material contribution it makes to socio-economic development by providing the necessary moral guidance, critique, caution, and evaluation. Reading any developmental documents one would think that the sciences and the arts are mutually exclusive in our lives. Terry Eagleton argues that artists “raise questions of quality of life in a world where experience itself seems brittle and degraded” and that “those who deal with art speak the language of values rather than price. They deal with work whose depth and intensity shows up the meagerness of everyday life in a market-obsessed society” (Lodge and Wood 2008: 833). The market is the final phase of technology. In this sense literature seems to be antithetical to scientific technological development aimed at poverty eradication. This is subversive indeed! Yet, paradoxically, literature enhances development by providing the vital antidote to value-free capitalist tendencies that drive humanity to obsessions. Moderation is humane but obsession is savage. To serve humanity constructively, capital, machines and markets need the humanities, and literature in particular. It is therefore a great relief to encounter the African Union's recognition of the essential complementarity of the arts and sciences in development in its *Agenda 2063*, quoted above. Ngugi wa Thiong'o delineates the complementarity between the sciences and the arts in colonialism succinctly in *Writers and Politics*:

to make economic and political control the more complete, the colonizing power tries to control the cultural environment: education, religion, language, theatre, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people's values and ultimately world look, their image and definition of self. (1981: 12)

The same complementarity underpins contemporary non-residential imperialism because it is basically cultural. It is characterised by entertainment excesses in music, film, pornography, and non-scientific sporting activities circulated on the internet, which was hitherto the highest stage of technology, second only to the traversing of outer space. Some of the rich and famous of the developed world thrive on the arts that are first created imaginatively then scientifically commoditised and technologically disseminated. The developed world rewards its artists alongside scientific inventors. The many awards and prizes, among which the Nobel Prize for literature ranks highest, exemplify the great significance attached to the discipline. Thankfully the award committees abroad have awarded some African artists—some of whom are

victimised at home. In Kenya, for example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the leading artist, is yet to be awarded for his larger-than-life literary contribution.

Considering the broad function of literature, it is understandable that it is literary artists—most of whom are products of an imperialist education system—who have effectively scrutinised and deconstructed imperialist ideologies and survival strategies. While many Africans were still mesmerised by European merchandise and convinced of the noble motives of European civilising missions purportedly aimed at developing the dark continent, African writers saw social disintegration culminating in retrogressive development. Subsequent struggles and mobilisation for independence were punctuated with various genres of literary art: work songs, war songs, negritude poetry, fighting poetry like *Bullets Begin to Flower*, *Sacred Hope*, the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and similar travails all over the continent. There were also predictions of the impending demise of resident colonialism in *The Conservationist*, and the end of racism in *In the Fog of the Season's End*—to name just a few. And as Africans began to celebrate decolonisation, it did not take long before artistic rulers saw through the façade that clouded their political counterparts and christened the process neo-colonialism. This is what created conflict between some of the authors and post-independence political leaders.

The first generation of writers who have outlived victimisation and survived into the twenty-first century have been joined by younger generations and are still at it—scrutinising issues, interrogating concepts, subverting wrongheaded policies, analysing structures of development versus the quality of life of the ordinary citizen. In effect, they are employing literary stylistics to expose political gimmicks and re-examine an Africanisation of capitalist oppression that retards Africa's genuine development, which should entail raising the quality of life of “the wretched of the earth”. If such discourses are not integral to development or even developmental in their own right, what is?

The nature of literature facilitates its broad function, which combines the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and values. It can achieve a form of change that is not scientifically verifiable, but change nonetheless because literary art is forged in a language that prompts the audience to critical thought, emotion and feeling. Wellek and Warren describe literature thus: “Poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language and sometimes does even violence to them, in an effort to force us into awareness and attention” (1949/1986: 24). They also specify the characteristics and intended effect of this use of language as contrasted with literal use of language:

Compared to scientific language, literary language will appear in some ways deficient. It abounds in ambiguities; ... it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations. In a word, it is highly ‘connotative’. Moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It has its expressive side; it conveys the tone and attitude of the speaker or writer. And it does not merely state and express what it says; it also wants to influence the attitude of the reader, persuade him, and ultimately change him. (ibid: 23)

It is in this creative use of language that artistic insight resides. Artists are not always obliged to create new knowledge but rather may prompt their audience to rethink what they know but fail to examine critically.

This is what makes literature pervasive, this constant reminder: the awakening and prompting of minds that have become acquainted and acquiescent with perceived fate. In his unique way of pointing out the familiar anew, the artist defamiliarises and disrupts. It would appear that the author is indeed creating new ideas because she expresses them in new words that recapture attention. According to Charles Davis, “An author, if he is big enough, can do much for his fellow men. He can put words in their mouths and reason in their heads; he can fill their sleep with dreams so potent that when they awake they will continue living them” (qtd. in p'Bitek, 1980: 39). In the post-independence African context this didactic function of

literature has often been perceived as treasonable because it constructs antidotes to official propaganda. Literature must do this or risk degenerating into cheap court poetry. Didacticism is propagandist in a finer sense of the word.

In society official views emanating from political rulers are often misrepresented not only as the wish of the majority but also erroneously as the ‘truth’. And literature—mere imagination—should by inference be the “mother of all lies” as Plato said. In which case, literature should not have bothered Plato or any other ruler. But it did, and still does, precisely because it has the potential to be the expression of the ‘real truth’ as distinct from an alternative view of truth manipulated through political stylistics. The artist scrutinises the first truth-cum-lies, and presents it together with other perspectives in verse and imagery so that the readers can see and judge for themselves. In a sense, all the ‘truths’ are given an evidential base in reality which leads to verification of both the lies and truth, and the latter eventually emerges because

[t]ruth in literature is the same as truth outside of literature, i.e. systematic and publicly verifiable knowledge. The novelist has no magic short cut to present state of knowledge in the social sciences which constitutes the ‘truth against which his ‘world truth’, his fictional reality, is to be checked. (Wellek and Warren 1949/1986: 33)

For example, if there is development on River Road in the city of Nairobi, Kenya, it may be evaluated by enumerating the tall buildings there, but since ‘development’ is humanistic it should also be seen in the lifestyle of the people who live there. In Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*, it transpires that the people who labour to construct the buildings have no access to the benefits they generate. The first meaning/truth of development is immediately disrupted by the second truth. Each is a truth in context but one must supersede the other because humanity is the ultimate development index. When the latter resonates with the majority of humanity, political rulers have a lot to fear, particularly because the method of purveyance of the latter is sweetly alluring, as p’Bitek observes:

The artist proclaims the laws but expresses them in the most indirect language: through metaphor and symbol, in image and fable. He sings and dances his laws. It is taught, not in the school of law, not at the inns of court, but around the evening fire, where elephants and hares act as men. The body movement, the painting, the sculptures are his law books. The drums, the flutes, the horns, the strumming and plucking on the strings of the musical instruments, are the proclamations of his decrees. He lures his subjects by the sweetness of his song, and the beauty of his works. He punishes the culprits with laughter, and awards the good mannered with praises. (1986: 36)

I now turn to the contribution of Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o among the many African writers who have contributed to African development in terms of their deconstruction and reconstruction of various African experiences. From the 1950s to the present African writers have focused on many topics and themes including missionary factors, the impact and aftermath of colonialism, the question of African identity, the debate over oratory and literature, political and economic conflicts, social changes, the link between history and literature, nationalism and contemporary issues, and Afrocentric literary theory. Ngugiwa Thiong’o’s fictional and non-fictional texts cover all these topics, and five of his critical texts—namely, *Homecoming* (1972), *Writers in Politics* (1981), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), and *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing* (2012)—sufficiently represent the power of literature in African experience. In these five critical texts wa Thiong’o delineates the role of the African writer and his literary creation from the vantage point of the larger-than-life author, critic, academic, social activist, political detainee, and post-colonial theorist that he is. His critical texts provide the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that

underpin his enormous creative oeuvre, including novels, plays, short stories, children's literature and memoirs, some of which are written in his vernacular Gikuyu. His literary works capture everything that seems to summarise Kenya's journey through the last sixty years. In all his texts, this author writes for a wider continental, even international, rather than local national space. In Afro-centric terms his context includes the African diaspora and the entire Third World. For this reason wa Thiong'o, his literature, critical texts, and his travails at the behest of the powers that be in Kenya, all constitute the quintessential power of literature in the African context. Any study of wa Thiong'o can be superabundant in terms of research problems and questions (of which he raises very many), objectives and significance, theoretical/conceptual framework and the methodology he offers.

The titles of wa Thiong'o's critical texts listed above are self-explanatory—they all emphasise the function and power of literary artist and text in various contexts from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial. As mentioned earlier, there are many other writers in Africa who double as literary critics, but wa Thiong'o surpasses them in many ways. He has written more than forty books of fiction and non-fiction, some of which have been translated into thirty languages.

His first critical text, *Homecoming* (1972), is a recognition of Africa's loss of identity and the need to return, not to the 'ideal' traditional culture, but to a space from where the African writer and reader can re-examine and critique their colonial status quo. The text included papers that were presented at the first African writers' conference at Makerere University in Uganda, where he was an undergraduate student at the time. In *Writers in Politics* (1981), he discusses the power of literature vis-à-vis as well as versus politics. He explains how colonialism exploited the power of literature to destroy the image of the colonised and therefore the inevitability of reversing the same in the attempt to regain lost identity.

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1981), wa Thiong'o engages the politics of language in African literature. In order for African literature to play the role expected of it, the author argues that the question of language cannot be ignored. For him much of the power of the text resides in the language in which it is written:

The choice of language and the use to which it is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century. (1981: 4)

In this text wa Thiong'o discusses the many strategies that were used by colonialists to kill African languages, but which refused to die. Yet refusal to write in the languages is what may eventually kill them. Regarding his choice to write in vernacular, he envisages the problem of a limited audience, but the value of the text far outweighs that limitation. In fact, his first book in Gikuyu was well received, judging from the sales. He was also the first African writer to be detained by his tribesman president for producing a play in vernacular which attracted crowds. For wa Thiong'o, therefore:

The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In our struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do: then we become part of those millions whom Martin Carter once saw sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world. (ibid: 108)

This debate on the language of African literature continues, with many writers taking either side. However, African literature has developed and had a strong impact on development despite the language issue. The power of wa Thiong'o's works is exemplified by the

translations into many languages. There are many other African writers whose books have been multiply translated globally. Whereas wa Thiong'o's view remains that part of the power of the text lies in its original language in relation to the reader, it is also true that its appeal nationally and internationally emanates from its content, which has universal meanings and implications. This is what is meant by a text having power across numerous contexts. Although the choice of a text's language implies the choice of immediate target audience, it does not restrict an extended audience who can access it through translation. Ironically this issue that is raised about writing in African languages is a non-issue to writers in other languages besides English and French. No Afrikaans, Arabic, Mexican, Korean or any other minority-language community writer need agonise over this issue. wa Thiong'o need not do so either. His concern in a nation with an illiterate majority should be literacy rather than English. One need not write in a dominant international language in order to communicate with the international community. He would definitely not want to believe that his earlier fiction written in English targeted first and foremost an international audience. Interestingly the articles of the African Union Agenda 2063 cited above support wa Thiong'o's view on African languages. So wa Thiong'o's other contribution is the development of his vernacular Gikuyu, which is timely. In order to meet the AU target, some language communities in Kenya will have to start from the introduction of lexicography and lexicology.

wa Thiong'o's fourth book-length critical text *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) deconstructs Eurocentrism, racism, classism, and sexism as forms of constriction from which literature and literary criticism needs to be liberated. This argument is based on his view that the world is inhabited by different peoples with different worldviews located in different centres. The centres relate or should relate to one another on equal terms. The various forms of marginalisations created by the isms above are manifested in language, literature and cultural studies. Therefore, to reconstruct the situation, the process of moving the centre must take place in "nationalism, class, race and gender" (wa Thiong'o 2012: 50). Literature has the capacity to move centres in this way and achieve cultural freedoms. But this is not possible unless there is a change in the method of interpreting a given text. The latter is the subject of wa Thiong'o's latest critical text: *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2012).

The meaning we tease out of a text "depends on how we read it and what baggage we bring to it" (ibid: 50). This premise underpins the subject of the critical text above. In this text the author defines globalectic reading as

a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes form [sic] a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place, the better to make it yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read a text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text. (2012: 51)

While much of African literature achieves the decentring of knowledge from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism, globalectics decentres theories of reading and knowing from the same monocentrism because "Globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectness.... It is a way of reading and relating to the world particularly in this era of globalism and globalization" (ibid: 7).

On the whole there are no specific criteria by which the power and impact that African writers and their works have made on African development can be quantified and qualified, but the reverse argument negating such an impact would be impossible to construct considering the large number of literary titles that have come out of Heinemann and other publishers. Some writers like the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah wish they would have contributed directly to solving social problems (Wästberg 1988). Other writers such as the Nigerian Christopher

Okigbo participated directly and even died; in his case in the Biafran civil war. Armah's frustration is shared by many African writers, who know that their wisdom is rarely accepted by the target audience, particularly those in power. But Armah's compatriot, the late Senegalese author Sembene Ousmane, argued that he was making an impact through serving his people, who had given him a task about which politicians did not want to hear. He insisted that it was the responsibility of a writer to be "the voice of the less-privileged" (ibid: 22). This mission of the writer is a signifier of his power. As stated earlier, the censorship that has been experienced at different times all over the continent is yet another signifier of the same. And now, thankfully, the African Union has acknowledged that literary among other arts constitute sustainable-development goals. In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's name may not appear on every other building, street or school signpost, but the power of his pen remains unsurpassed.

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The Neutral View: Roland Barthes' Representations of Japan and China

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Abstract

Roland Barthes visited Japan and China in the 1970s. He recorded his travel experiences in two contrasting books, *Empire of Signs* (1982) and *Travels in China* (2012). The second book is written in notebook form, which, as such, was not prepared by the author for publication. The first book can be seen as a highly polished 'fictional' or aestheticized rendering of Japan and Japanese culture; the latter, on the other hand, is largely unmediated by the same aesthetic and aestheticizing concerns. This essay reads the two texts through the perspective of another of Barthes' texts, *The Neutral* (2005), which deals with the subject of conflict-free or non-judgemental modes of discourse in linguistic and cultural theory. I aim to show how a Neutral take on a region or people can offer a fairer or less prejudicial view than has happened hitherto in travel writing and travel narratives.

Keywords: travel writing, Barthes, representation, Japan, China, the Neutral, blandness

Most representations of others are self-representations, both in the individual sense and the larger cultural one. It is almost a truism of Western travel writing, for example, that the travel writer can never unpack his cultural baggage completely; there will always be a photo of Mum, an Argyle sock or a patented Sheffield Steel toenail clipper left tucked away in a side-pocket of his tote. What the writer sees and writes is compromised at the outset. He may strive to erase traces of cultural bias in his narrative, but will almost certainly fail, if not through the domestication inherent in the organizational impulse (Youngs 184), then through inter-discursive promptings and maskings.¹

Roland Barthes argues that it is impossible to know the other because the writer can never be free of what he calls *doxa*, public opinion, received ideas, the prevailing viewpoint (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 70–71; Herschberg-Pierrot *passim*). He even suggests that such knowledge is undesirable (*Empire* 3): for knowledge of the other demarcates; it reduces and confines, eventually providing the template by which all others may be known (Blanton 109). This can lead to the colonialist tendency, for example, to see Europe as the repository of Civilization, Africa as the scene of the tribal and pre-modern and East Asia as a metaphor for the hypermodern in all its dimensions.

In cultural theory, the standard response to this has been, at least since the 1980s, as follows: if we could see cultures “not as organically unified and stable monoliths but as negotiated present processes” (Clifford 273), then we might avoid generalizing, stereotyping, exoticizing, or simply ‘othering’ what is alien to our world (Clifford and Marcus; Pratt; Taussig; Youngs; Blanton; Thompson). Experiencing and then writing difference could become two-directional and even multi-directional, rather than purely one-way. The writing subject may not only write and be written by the written subject: she and her subject may also be re-written within a larger dynamic of cultural exchanges. Ideally, domestication would give way to the transactional. Such a response to time, place, people and knowledge might not only help to blur the steadfast focus on the truth of a representation but also, by its tentativeness and dialogicality, allow for what seems, in an increasingly inter-meshed global setting, a way of writing that, if not a fair and accurate representation, is at least a more empathetic one.

The crisis of representation will not go away. But it isn’t as serious as it sounds. While I might be unsure that a travel narrative is an accurate, true, just representation of reality, I’ll always be able to see it as an interpretation of that reality. Rather than feeling that a representation is always false and therefore unjust, I should simply be cautious about its claims; I should, in other words, not think of it as innocent and unmotivated. But is that as good as it gets?

Perhaps there is a way out of this sort of representational impasse that doesn’t lead to qualified or hesitant readings. If the writer or reader could stop seeing the whole in the part, and start looking elsewhere, or just glance at the part itself without implying a whole, he or she need not become bogged down in issues of truth to reality or the whole business of truth-claims at all. Why make any claims in the first place? Why not just look askance?

*

In what follows, I discuss Roland Barthes’ two travel books on Japan and China, one published in 1970, the other posthumously in 2009. I consider each through the medium of Barthes’ own thoughts on what (following Structuralist thought generally) he calls the Neutral (*Le Neutre*).

¹ The reference is not just to Foucauldian discourse but also to Jean-François Lyotard’s argument that no testimony, and implicitly, no representation, can ever do justice to the original experience or subject. See *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2011.

The book on this subject was first published in 2002 but formed the body of a series of lectures at the Collège de France from 1977 to 1978.

In Barthes' book,² the Neutral displaces the neither/nor, either/or type of opposition that Saussurian linguistics finds at the heart of meaning-production in Western discourse (7–11). If I say one thing, it will only be because I didn't say another. While this sort of approach has been shoved to one side in recent years, in favour of more flexible sets of relational distinctions, Barthes' argument for a Neutral that "dodges", "baffles" or "outplays" (*déjoue*) the contrastive machinery of meaning-production, which he calls "unshakeable" (41), still seems pertinent.

Barthes stresses the conflictual nature of meaning-production (7). One term will always lose out. The Neutral does not seek to recover that term; it does not aim at an equality of terms; it is not even an area of greyness between terms (9–11). The Neutral is an attempt to step outside the play of power and hierarchy intrinsic to any form of oppositionality; it is an evasion, bodily and affective, that thwarts the game, displacing conflict and the supervention of one term or set of terms over another by, for example, the writer/speaker/observer oscillating, retreating, being indifferent, remaining silent, or simply falling asleep. The Neutral way of writing offers signs-in-themselves or "twinklings" (*scintillations*), as Barthes calls them (10), shimmers on the surface—fictions that by their refusal to assert one thing over another escape the snap and crush of judgement.³

In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes constructs a system, which he calls 'Japan', that seeks not to represent or analyse any cultural or historical reality—the "major gestures of Western discourse" (4). His Japan, he claims, is an invention, created out of a reserve of real cultural and historical features, to be sure, but without using them as veridical indices of the reality elsewhere. For Barthes, reading these features leads to something like the Zen notion of *satori*, a moment of awareness or vision that causes the subject and knowledge itself to vacillate. He takes certain cultural elements that recur in Western discourse's perception of Japan in the 1970s (or, indeed, today)—tea ceremonies, chopsticks, sukiyaki, bowing, pachinko, packages, bunraku, haiku, sumo—and treats them as phenomena stripped of history. Suki-yaki, for example, becomes a spectacle rather than a meal (19–20), pachinko is both a voluptuous exercise and a type of diarrhoea (29), sumo is "a certain hefting, not the erethism of conflict", heaving rather than struggling (40). In this treatment, surface supervenes over depth, the object of discourse is not transparent, not a glass behind which meanings are discoverable. Shimmerings are what the eye (or the sensate body) enjoys. The haiku does not encode anything. It is an impression, a surface without depth, an "apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance" (78); it does not accumulate significations. Where Western discourse must mean something, or is read, necessarily, for its meaning, the haiku, all surface and immediacy, baffles meaning. To make his point, Barthes gives several examples of haikus and the way Western discourse might strive to dig meaning out of them.

This is his example from Joko:

How many people
have crossed the Seta bridge
through the Autumn rain? (71)

Typically, in the West this will be read as an image of "fleeting time" (71). Autumn precedes winter; it presages a landscape of death; its rain stands for tears; it is a metaphor for aging and

² Unattributed page numbers throughout this paper refer to this work.

³ I am indebted to Rudolphus Teeuwen's "An Epoch of Rest: Roland Barthes's 'Neutral and the Utopia of Weariness'", *Cultural Critique*, 80, Winter 2012, 1–26, for much of this summary.

sadness. The Seta bridge becomes a symbol for the passing of humanity. For the Westerner, all such words entail “symbol and reasoning, metaphor and syllogism” (71).

The syllogistic, Barthes says, is often applied to Basho’s famous:

The old pond:
a frog jumps in:
Oh! the sound of the water. (71)

In a Western reading, the last line concludes the other two, which effectively reduces this haiku to an exercise in logic. For Barthes, the haiku should suspend language, not provoke it, which is the Way of the Neutral. This Neutral might better be understood by thinking of it as *nuance*, that which lies to one side of an assertion, inarticulate but there, whose ultimate effect is to disturb and preclude logic and conclusiveness. The sound of the old pond’s water can be heard even now, concluding nothing.

Yet, far from suspending language, Barthes’ use of Japan-the-faraway-place only seems to amplify it, provoking more and more words. In fact, his whole book is a lingual provocation, a proliferation of nuances, often in line with Western discursive procedures. It is also, despite its disavowals, a representation of Japan. He writes:

In the West, the mirror is essentially a narcissistic object: a man conceives a mirror only in order to look at himself in it; but in the Orient, apparently, the mirror is empty; it is a symbol of the very emptiness of symbols.... [T]he mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself.... Hence the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without a cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings. (79)

Barthes clearly wants to turn this faraway place into a play of surfaces whose effect is to free him from the near-compulsive search for meaning and plenitude.

I want to look at this passage more closely. First, Barthes is talking about a Western need for enlightenment, for knowledge; second, he is talking about Japan (which he conflates with ‘the Orient’) and its system of signs without meaning (note the delicacy of that qualifier ‘apparently’, which remembers the earlier disavowals, even as it enables the locutions, the assertions, to follow), gestures without depth. But third, he is ultimately not doing either of these things: he is talking about the Neutral, that which escapes the implicit opposition of the previous two. I take him at his word. While I could dismiss the first two approaches as oppositional and imposed, the third seems transactional and dialogic to the extent that it escapes the sorts of cultural codifications that conventionally, in the West at least, impose themselves on the nation known as Japan.

For this is how he wants to view his ‘Japan’—as a sort of pretext for a Neutral view of things as he encounters them on his travels. This Neutral, this vagrancy in the streets of meaning-production, is a pretext, in turn, for “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems” (3). I take the Neutral, then, as Barthes subtly works it through his own texts,⁴ as an enabling strategy for responding to other cultures, communities and people with as little judgement, assertion, generalization or reductionism as possible. Accordingly, I will look at his own account of his 1974 visit to China, recently published as *Travels in China*. The book is made up of Barthes’ notebooks; it is neither a finished account, in the sense that Barthes’ might have understood it, nor a redaction. It has not been overly domesticated, or twisted into shape by discursive constraints. As such, it affords me the opportunity to recover a Neutral view of China.

⁴ See particularly *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) and *The Neutral* (2005), *passim*.

*

Travels to China is unfinished in that it is composed of the three diary notebooks Barthes compiled during his visit, which he had intended to use for a book (195–6). The visit lasted from 11 April to 4 May, a matter of just over three weeks.

At around this time, French intellectuals were galvanized by China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The radical journal *Tel Quel* had broken from the French Communist Party to declare its support for Maoism. The editorial team, which included Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, François Wahl and Marcelin Pleynet, visited China as guests of the Chinese state travel bureau. The odds were stacked against free and open reportage from the start. The tour was tightly organized, with almost no opportunity for unsupervised interaction with the people or country.

Barthes' notes are terse, impressionistic and yet heavily annotated with second thoughts or bracketed asides, and often accompanied by pencil sketches. The style is dry and tart, almost immediately so as boredom and disillusion kicks in. In Beijing, he writes: "Smells. Cabbages on the Square. Palace Museum. Wet dog, cheesy manure, sour milk" (11). Eighty pages later, in Luoyang, he notes with no change of tone or pace: "Stifling. Waited for the others outside the tomb, as well as a hundred and fifty people [*sic*]. Lovely weather. Peonies" (96). When his plane takes off for home, he writes "Phew!" and draws a square round the word (193).

Near the beginning, at a printing works in Beijing, an aside states: "It's always the same: the proles are good-looking—heart-melting, needing help—but as soon as they become Cadres, their faces change (our guides, the Official). It's insoluble" (17). Insolubility is thematic. Barthes cannot get beyond doxa—or party-line, if you like—which he says, in a key image, is spread over China like a tablecloth with no folds in it (43).

The text lacks the rapture of *Empire of Signs*. It is busy with assertions of the author's boredom, weariness, discomfort (he suffers insomnia and migraines) and his constant irritation at not being able to interact with the people. The places he visits are uniform, policed by government minders, and there is no surprise and no interruption to the daily itinerary. One of the works on China that had excited him before his departure was Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972), which was criticised by the Chinese for focusing on busy street scenes and casual activities (kids running, old men exercising, women chatting, wind blowing leaves along the Great Wall's walkway and grainy close-ups of faces and heads turning in tea shops), rather than the State's industrial developments. The very elements that the Chinese authorities objected to were the ones that caught Barthes' eye. He laments that he wouldn't be able to produce a finished book without offending China's sensibilities in the same way as Antonioni had done (29). He also means that he wouldn't be able to produce a book like the one that had come out of his earlier Japan trip.

The best he can do, he says, is to write a book about 'us'—meaning the West of his time: "Any book on China cannot help but be exoscopic" (81). And indeed *Travels in China* is studded with comparisons—to the West, particularly to France, French cuisine, French landscape and French people. In Shanghai, an emaciated writer reminds him of Michel Foucault (26). On the way to Nanjing, the flat countryside and fields of rape are French (57). In Xian, peasant paintings evoke those by Henri Rousseau (125). This China offers little in the way of nuance. It becomes a place where French intellectuals and emblems of French culture spring up from fields and cities like jack-in-a-boxes.

Barthes says that there are two conventional ways of looking at China: "a gaze coming from the inside" is from the point of view of China; the second comes "from the point of view of the West". Both gazes are wrong: "The right gaze is the sideways gaze" (177). Towards the end, as he re-reads his notes, in order, he says, to make an index, he observes that if he were to turn his notes into a finished book, he would have to write either on the 'in' side, which is

“approving”, or ‘out’, which is “criticizing” (195) Both are impossible. He is left with the Antonioni approach: phenomenological (195)—which the Chinese hosts will, he jokes, condemn as “Criminal!”

So what is involved in a sideways gaze, in a phenomenological or criminal look? How does it anticipate or coincide with a neutral view? The first way of writing China is through what Barthes calls the “double-glazed window” of 1970s Chinese doxa, which is in turn composed of “bricks” (*briques*) or blocks, thick, impenetrable, sound-proofed, opaque (19). His approval will forever be implicit. But on the Huang-po River, under a rough sketch of a sampan, Barthes writes:

Boats, all sorts of boats.

And now the naval dockyard where we were yesterday (on the right).

Very beautiful: the big boats, at anchor, halted in the middle of the river, sometimes two by two, for kilometre after kilometre. And always sampans, sails with Brechtian colours.

After an hour and a half (at 3 p.m.) we reach the confluence with the Yangzi (after 28 kilometres, practically, of port, and boats of every kind). It widens out until the continuous line of real Ocean: blue grey, boat in the distance placed against this immensity. (45)

This is the second way of writing China, from the outside, though here its criticism is tacit. It is a view that first drew Barthes to China: land of sampans, Brechtian sails, the impressionistic, an aesthete’s idyll, the sort of panoramic ‘vision’ of the Huang Po that Antonioni had offered in *Chung Kuo, Cina*.

Barthes again refers several times to the haiku, which he equates with the incident, or fold or crease, to return to the earlier metaphor of the tablecloth, and which surprises. Doxa can be taken by surprise: an incident that ‘falls’, that intervenes, like a leaf (because it is fragile and tenuous) between the viewer and the doxical spectacle, re-focussing vision—much like haiku (205). An open-air cinema in Luoyang has that effect: a Romanian movie, which is showing, seems incongruous, the weather is mild, the place doesn’t feel artificial, street boys playing cards smile (96–97). Normally this sort of scene is blocked by prevailing doxa. It is a criminal view.

Doxa can be self-imposed. Barthes’ sexual interest in Chinese males is an area of folding or creasing (or criminality) within the tablecloth of his own doxa. For it is certain that had he published the Notebooks as they stand, he would have censored such references.⁵ He was fastidious in keeping his homosexuality closeted throughout his life. At the beginning of *Travels in China* he mentions his male lover whose hand he kissed “furtively” at Paris-Orly Airport. Barthes faithfully records the episode. The friend wonders if he’s scared of being seen. Barthes gives his reply: he’s only afraid someone might see how “old-fashioned” the gesture is and that the friend would be “embarrassed” (5). The reader cannot know if Barthes was being disingenuous, but the unedited claims elicit a frisson of transgression intermixed with perplexity and the incommunicable. That the lover should wonder if Barthes is scared of being seen draws us back into a harsher time, a world of homophobic judgements, while the furtiveness of Barthes’ kiss (as a result of fear that the gesture might seem dated to his lover and that the lover would be embarrassed by it) seems to draw attention to the act, rather than conceal it. This works to grant his observations both a sideways engagement with sexual otherness and a certain edgy neutrality in his reading of China.

How then do the Chinese twinkle, how do they become neutral, nuanced, eluding truth, depth and the doxical arrangements of both themselves and the Western visitor? How do the

⁵ And there are many. He claims, not unreasonably, that no one can know a people without knowing their sex (100). Writing, he says, is dry and sterile, without joy, *jouissance* (75). *Jouissance* underwrites his travels both to China and Japan, indeed, but not in the same way. A satisfied erotic interest seems to account for the successful completion of *Empire of Signs* and a frustrated one the failure, or silence, of *Travels in China*.

people and the place become not just paradoxical but also sidelong? How does Barthes create a just representation? Precisely, it seems, by not finding the folds, surprises and haiku-like incidents he seeks. By annotating the different doxas (Chinese, Western and his own) instead, and the stranglehold they have on his perceptions, and in so doing, experiencing frustration and weariness, he finds the very conditions of non-judgement, or, at least, a dodging of judgement, that marks the Neutral.

Barthes' sideways gaze is as an invitation. Traditional Chinese aesthetics, which Barthes' own thought tends towards, is hospitable to this. In his Collège de France lectures, Barthes equates the Neutral with the Taoist *wu-wei*, inaction, non-choice or abstention: it is "structurally, a Neutral, what baffles the paradigm" (176). *Wu-wei* abstains from belief, or a position; it is philosophical abstinence (180). Its most strenuous modality, indeed its highpoint, consists in sitting, which, for Barthes, recalls the standard Zen (*zazen*) position in meditation: to be sitting (184). If this *wu-wei* were applied to poetry or painting it would suggest *dan*, or blandness.

For François Julien, blandness is the "embodiment of neutrality" and "lies at the point of origin of all things possible" (23). In another text, "Alors la Chine?", written and published on his return from China,⁶ Barthes mentions his sense of a suspension (of meaning, sense, ardour), and notes that what was revealed to him was a "delicacy, or, better yet (I venture using [*sic*] this word, at the risk of having to take it up again later) blandness" (28). Barthes teeters on the verge of the negative connotation of the word but rescues the observation from judgement with the parenthetical qualifiers. Julien, whose quoting of this passage I am merely repeating, suggests that here Barthes writes two discourses at the same time, and that the secondary one struggles to put into words what the first would obliterate: a sense that blandness really is the right word (29).

Blandness represents nothing. In Julien's reading it actually "de-represents" connoting a "beyond" that is not symbolic (116). In traditional Chinese poetics, blandness is the ideal the poet must aim for: too much flavour and the poem overwhelms its subject; too little and there is no subject. The poet should strive for balance and harmony, which, once accomplished, lead the reader or auditor away from the sorts of polarizing oppositionality or conflicting viewpoints that Barthes had striven to avoid in his travel texts. The bland sign does not indicate another meaning, or suggest a hermeneutics of discovery; it is not interested in depth, fullness, or truth. On the contrary, blandness "invites us to free ourselves from the differentiating nature of meaning"; it "creates ease" (122). There are no messages, only silence (123).⁷

Barthes travels to the hot springs of Huaqingshi. The others, Sollers, Kristeva, Wahl and Pleynet, climb the mound above the tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di, Emperor of the Legalists. Barthes scribbles a note:

I stay by myself and sit on the ground in an orchard, above the wheat field, in front of the vast, floating, green horizon. A few brick buildings in a powdery pink-beige, distant music. A brown beige field, with wide undulating furrows. Trees here and there, in the background. Noise of an invisible motorbike. (135)

Wonderfully bland! Barthes sits in an orchard. He does not stand surveying the landscape from a vantage-point, like the colonialists of earlier travel narratives, or, indeed, like the others in his party. He sits apart, detached, in the manner of *wu-wei*, in front of a vast floating green horizon, registering colours, shapes, music, the sound of a motorbike, little else. There is no imposition, not even a hint of judgement. Barthes is at ease. In traditional Chinese thought,

⁶ Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975.

⁷ Traditional Chinese poetics is traceable back to Confucius and early Daoist thought. While Confucius does not develop a theory of representation, he does caution against the transformative power of language; the Daoist foundational text *Laozi* advises the sage to adopt an attitude of 'lucid non-action' (Julien 157–9).

blandness “is this experience of transcendence reconciled with nature —and divested of faith” (Julien 144). And this, I think, is what Barthes has achieved.

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**The Relation between Words and Worlds
in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay***

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. In the first part, Chabon's novel will be read as an example of what Linda Hutcheon has coined "historiographic metafiction". In the second part, I will show that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is an excellent illustration of Brian McHale's definition of postmodern literature and that this postmodern identity plays an important role in expressing the novel's main theme, escapism.

Keywords: Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, postmodernism, historiographic metafiction, possible worlds, 'ontological' layers, (de)mythification, escapism

Introduction

Even though the heyday of postmodern literature has passed, and the theoretical and critical concepts that were developed to discuss postmodern literature no longer draw the attention they used to, the postmodern legacy still offers interesting insights into complex works of literature such as Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*¹ (2000). My analysis of Chabon's magnum opus is deeply rooted in and indebted to the postmodern writings of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale.

Considering the complexity and the scale of *Kavalier & Clay*, the first part of this paper will introduce the plot before delving more deeply into *Kavalier & Clay*'s intertextual interaction with various genres. *Kavalier & Clay* shares characteristics with multiple genres, yet it is hard to pigeonhole. The label that is most readily applicable to *Kavalier & Clay* is that of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) to describe literature that bridges the gap between (postmodern) fiction and historiography. *Kavalier & Clay* is at home in this grey area, this 'twilight zone' between genres, and a discussion of the novel as a piece of historiographic metafiction unveils both the poetical and the political concerns at stake when representing the past.

In the second part, which is the focus of this paper, I will analyse *Kavalier & Clay* in the light of the definition of postmodern literature Brian McHale put forward in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). Reading *Kavalier & Clay* in this light offers a better understanding of the novel's main theme, escapism. As I will show, Chabon's novel is elusive in more ways than one, to such an extent even that it thematises its elusiveness. Ultimately *Kavalier and Clay*'s tales of escapism are also tales *about* escapism.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and Historiographic Metafiction

Michael Chabon's novel tells the story of Josef Kavalier, the eldest son in a Jewish family. He grows up in Prague, where, along with his schooling as an artist at the Academy, where he quickly develops a gift for drawing, he is trained as an escape artist by the renowned *Ausbrecher* Bernard Kornblum. Josef reaches adolescence as World War II breaks out and Prague is occupied by Nazi Germany. Jews are relocated to ghettos, and before long their situation deteriorates drastically. It is impossible for the whole family to escape the atrocities that await them; all their hope resides in getting Josef to a safe place, somewhere far away. Although his family's attempt to bribe officials fails, Josef succeeds in escaping with the help of his teacher Kornblum, who involves his student in an escape trick he was commissioned to develop by the Jewish community of Prague to get the city's Golem to a safe location. Hidden in a coffin underneath the Golem of Prague, which is disguised as a giant's corpse, Josef escapes the city. Having travelled the world he finally reaches New York, where, together with his cousin Sammy Clay, he becomes the creative force behind *The Escapist* and other successful comic-book titles, and starts a turbulent relationship with his muse Rosa Saks, an artist in her own right who is at home in New York's avant-garde art scene. After his arrival in New York, Josef works day and night trying to help his family escape Europe, but he ultimately fails as the ship transporting his brother across the Atlantic is struck by a German torpedo. Overcome by grief, Josef enlists in the army and disappears from the face of the earth, not knowing that his partner Rosa is expecting their child. He is detailed to an Antarctic outpost, where he fights his little war. When the war is over he returns to New York, where he finds his best friend Sam has taken on Josef's role and married Rosa in order to cover up his own suppressed homosexuality. The story ends with Josef assuming his rightful place as a father to

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Kavalier & Clay*.

his child and a husband to Rosa, as Sam leaves New York looking for love and a future in California.

Kavalier & Clay's epic scope spans three decades and two continents, offering a peculiar view of the second half of the twentieth century: from pre-World-War-II Prague, through the bustling, creative comic-book scene in New York and an American outpost in Antarctica during the war, to the suburban American Dream of the fifties and sixties. The novel supports an extremely varied cast, similar to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, including mythical, historical and fictional characters. But what to call it?

Although it certainly is no straightforward traditional novel, it does self-consciously label itself as "a novel" on its title page. Yet already on that very same page it contradicts itself, for the title page is not typical of a novel; the stylistic typography and layout are reminiscent of 1950s comic books. Every chapter is preceded by an identically styled title page carrying that chapter's title. It is clear that, although *Kavalier & Clay* differs too much from the comic-book medium to warrant this label, it does share some themes, motifs and narrative patterns with the genre. As in the majority of adventure comic books, the plot of *Kavalier & Clay* revolves around two main characters, the hero and his sidekick, who are involved in an epic battle against evil. Both, too, have a preference for the fantastic. As a result, the hero and his sidekick are endowed with powers—supernatural powers in the case of the comic-book heroes, less so in the case of the novel's heroes. Despite their many similarities, it is clear that *Kavalier & Clay* is a novel, not a comic book or graphic novel.

Yet if we are to call it a novel, what kind of novel is it? A number of generic labels suit *Kavalier & Clay*. It is—as I will show in the second part—a fantastic novel, but it is also to some extent a historical novel as it offers a narrative that includes real events, places and people of the second half of the twentieth century. The novel does, however, take considerable liberties in its treatment of these historical facts. The question then is where to draw the line between fiction and historiography.

From a postmodern point of view it remains to be seen whether there is a line to be drawn. Linda Hutcheon, although still using the terms historiography and fiction, also—and more frequently—relies on the concept of historiographic metafiction. Historiography, or the writing of history, is always the linguistic result of a subjective narrativisation or totalisation (Hutcheon 1989: 62), yet unlike fiction it pretends not to be one. Once you acknowledge that both historiography and literature are essentially textual, it becomes difficult to distinguish between a novel that represents a piece of history and a historiographic text. Therefore Hutcheon uses historiographic metafiction as a common denominator for texts that are defined by the self-conscious fashion in which they portray history: texts, be they historiographic or fictional, that expose the totalising process that is present in any and every narrativisation of the past.

Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction offers an interesting perspective on *Kavalier & Clay*, which represents a substantial slice of twentieth-century history, whilst forcing the reader to consider the metafictional complications of representations of the past. One strategy to cajole the reader into a metafictional aporia is to deliberately cancel the suspension of disbelief by manipulating paratextual traits. The footnotes throughout the novel, for example, force the reader to leave his or her linear reading of the text, creating a distance between the storyline and the commentary in the footnote. Another strategy is to create what Fredric Jameson has called "incommensurable characters" (1991: 22). Consider, for example, the scene in which Joe and Sammy attend a party in New York, a party thrown by Longman

Harkoo, né Siegfried Saks,² father to Rosa Luxembourg Saks.³ Other notable guests include Raymond Scott, Loren MacIver, Peter Blume, Edwin Dickinson, José Ferrer and Uta Hagen, and Salvador Dalí. At the party Joe saves Dalí, who has chosen to wear a diving suit to a dinner party, from suffocating. Dalí was in New York at the time of the World Fair in 1939,⁴ but it is unknown whether he attended the party in question, though surely not inconceivable. A notable Dalí diving-helmet incident did actually happen in London at the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936,⁵ but it is unlikely—though not impossible—that something similar occurred in New York. This single scene combines real historical figures—or at least their fictional representations—with fictional characters and puts them on the same level. These are just two of many strategies⁶ that effectively undermine readers' immersion in the story. Readers are destabilised as they are made aware that they are reading a totalising linguistic construction.

The representation of history is a major topic in *Kavalier & Clay*. It is, however, not merely a matter of poetics, but also of politics. Denying traditional historiography implies the rejection of the traditional historiographic perspective. Postmodern historiography has to adopt *other* perspectives, and it is exactly this otherness that defines these new perspectives; they are defined through their contrastive position in relation to the dominant point of view.

In the case of *Kavalier & Clay* the otherness can be brought back to two dimensions: *Yiddishkayt*, or Jewishness, and comic-book literature. The former constitutes the text's culturo-religious identity, whereas the latter defines the poetical stance taken by the text. These two dimensions are more intertwined than the dichotomy I have just proposed suggests, as there is a strong bond between Jewishness and the birth of the comic-book genre. As Sammy puts it:

They're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing this name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself. (Chabon 2000: 585)

The creators of some of the first and most important comic-book series are Jews, whose Jewish identity is reflected in their creations. *Superman*, for example, was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.⁷ It tells the story and adventures of Kal-El, an alien with superhuman powers from the planet Krypton, who was sent to earth by his father just before his home planet was destroyed. Kal-El is named Clark Kent by his foster parents. As such, Kal-El possesses a double identity. On the one hand, he is a costumed superhero—arguably the first one of his kind. On

² I cannot find any record of a well-known art dealer named Siegfried Saks living in New York at that time. There was and still is a wealthy Jewish enclave in New York that included a number of Saks or Sachs families. Think for example of the founders of the eponymous department store on Fifth Avenue or the bank Goldman Sachs. The character of Longman Harkoo may also be inspired by the actor Andrew Siegfried Sachs.

³ I cannot find any record of Rosa Luxembourg Saks, but there is an obvious association to the feminist and revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg.

⁴ Dali created the 'Dream of Venus' pavilion for the 1939 World Fair in Queens.

⁵ Dali gave a lecture at the International Surrealist Exhibition in a diving helmet to reinforce the idea that he set out to dive into the human subconscious. However, while he was delivering his lecture, he got stuck and nearly suffocated.

⁶ These strategies are, of course, not new. They can also be found in postmodern texts by authors like Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges.

⁷ The plot of *Kavalier & Clay* borrowed elements of the real biographies of Siegel and Shuster. For example, like Siegel and Shuster, Kavalier and Clay were conned and did not get the recognition and earnings they deserved.

the other hand, he is a journalist with a spectacularly normal life. It is not difficult to relate the character of Superman to the image of the wandering Jew and the theme of perpetual alienation. Banished from his mother country, the wandering Jew keeps searching for a place to call home. He is a member of the chosen people, who have been greatly tested so that they may prove their worthiness. Similarly, Kal-El's home planet Krypton has been destroyed and he is shipped off to an unknown world. Whereas Kal-El's Superman identity reflects Jewish images and themes of mythical proportion, Clark Kent leads the life of the average American.

Brian McHale's Postmodernism and Tzvetan Todorov's Fantastic

The questions we have addressed up until now are largely concerned with genre, and *Kavalier & Clay* as a representative of historiographic metafiction. I believe there are other postmodern theories that shed an interesting light on *Kavalier & Clay*. For this second part of my analysis, I will mostly rely on the definition of postmodern literature put forward by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale links modernist fiction with epistemological questions and genres, such as the detective, and postmodernist fiction with ontological questions and genres, such as science-fiction. In order to clarify this connection, allow me to elaborate on McHale's theory.

I will follow Brian McHale, who borrows Thomas Pavel's words when defining ontology as "a theoretical description of a universe" (McHale 1987: 27). This is obviously the core business of fiction, as fiction implicitly offers theoretical descriptions of one or more universes, and, as can be deduced from Pavel's formulation, this universe does not have to be our universe, but merely *a* universe. Fiction is concerned with possible worlds, and each has its own ontology. Moreover, fictional characters can themselves conceive of ontologies, creating a hierarchy: a fictional world within a fictional world. Umberto Eco (1984) refers to these lower-order ontologies as subworlds, whereas Pavel (1980) prefers the term narrative domains. To complicate things even further, it could be argued that our reality is composed of a complex network of ontologies much like the ontological web found in works of fiction, forming, in Pavel's terminology, a complex ontological landscape. The borders between these ontologies—both real and fictional—are not written in stone. This lack of sharp distinctions between worlds leads McHale to conclude that the ontological boundaries are "semipermeable membranes". Subjects and objects can pass from one ontology to another, or change their ontological status. There are, for example, the processes of mythification and demythification, respectively the acquisition and the loss of a mythical status vis-à-vis a profane status.

Additional to the transfer of entities through the semipermeable ontological membrane, it is possible that entities exist in more than one world. According to Eco (1984) there is almost always a degree of overlap between two or more fictional ontologies or between real and fictional ontologies, because it is impossible to describe a world exhaustively. The most efficient textual strategy, therefore, is to rely on what is readily available to both author and reader. Thus, McHale concludes, it is possible that an entity exists in more than one world at the same time. McHale uses Eco's concept of 'transworld identities' to refer to these 'borrowed' entities.

If an entity in one world differs from its 'prototype' in another world only in accidental properties, not in essentials, and if there is a one-to-one correspondence between the prototype and its other-world variant, then the two entities can be considered identical even though they exist in distinct worlds. (McHale 1987: 35)

If, however, these entities look similar but in fact differ in essentials they are called homonyms. It is not difficult to imagine that this theoretical distinction cannot so easily be put into praxis. Moreover, in the light of Baudrillard's concept of simulacra (1994), it might be difficult—or

even impossible—to tell replica from prototype. Taking the theory of simulacra to its logical conclusion, the question is not to what extent the replica differs from the prototype, but to what extent the prototype differs from the replica.

McHale points out that postmodernist fiction shares a preference for dual ontologies with science-fiction: “on one side our world of the normal and everyday, on the other side the next-door world of the paranormal or supernatural, running between them the contested boundary separating the two worlds” (1987: 73).

Moreover, Mchale makes a compelling case for an ontological revision of Todorov’s classic definition of fantastic fiction, to which postmodernist fiction is also indebted (McHale 1987: 74). Todorov defined the fantastic as an ambiguous state between the uncanny, in which the supernatural could eventually be explained by relying on the laws of nature, and the marvellous, in which the supernatural could not be explained and was accepted as being precisely that, supernatural. Todorov’s definition of the fantastic can be paraphrased in terms of ‘epistemological uncertainty’; for the reader it is impossible to *know* whether or not the supernatural can be explained, and it is this ambiguity or uncertainty that is decisive. Mchale does not accept this epistemologically based definition as it excludes a lot of core postmodernist texts which do bear resemblance to the fantastic. Therefore, Mchale tries to revise or update Todorov’s definition. For a period of time the uncertainty that governed fantastic texts was epistemological in nature. However, in contemporary literature and literary criticism the representational capacities of language and literature have been under attack to such an extent that it has become questionable whether language and literature can represent reality. If these representational tools are broken then it becomes impossible to uphold epistemological uncertainty as the decisive criterion. The fantastic thus has to be redefined in terms of ontological uncertainty. “The fantastic, by this analysis, can still be seen as a zone of hesitation, a frontier—not, however, a frontier between the uncanny and the marvellous, but between this world and the world next door” (McHale 1987: 75).

Postmodernist fiction seeks to highlight the seams, where one world ends and another begins. There are various techniques that postmodern texts use to achieve this effect, but they all evoke resistance to the crossing of ontological boundaries. This resistance can be situated in the characters or in the readers. For if the characters fail to notice the ontological conflict, the reader’s awareness cannot but be heightened even more (McHale 1987: 76–79).

The Ontological Layers of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

In what follows I will deal with *Kavalier & Clay* as an example of the fantastic. I will take Mchale’s revision of Todorov’s definition of the concept as a starting point, but it will become clear that the definition of the fantastic has to be revised and expanded. Mchale turned Todorov’s epistemological ambiguity into an ontological ambiguity; the reader is not left wondering which representation, but which universe to choose. In *Kavalier & Clay* there are at least four ontologies that have to be taken into account: the reader’s, the fictional ‘real’, the Jewish/religious and the comic-book.

The fictional-real ontology mimics the reader’s ontology, making it resemble our ‘normal’ universe. This ontology has to play by the rules of historical fiction: that is, it aspires to verisimilitude. Therefore, this ontology can only contain ‘realemes’—semiotised persons, events, objects etc.—that could occur in historical fiction. Mchale lists three constraints that “govern the insertion of historical realemes”, but two of them can be combined (1987: 86–88). First, realemes and *Weltanschauungen* in historical fiction cannot contradict the ‘official’ historical record.

Another way of formulating this constraint would be to say that freedom to improvise actions and properties of historical figures is limited to the ‘dark areas’ of history, that is, to those aspects about which the ‘official’ record has nothing to report. (McHale 1987: 87)

Although McHale recognizes that calling upon the ‘official’ record of history is a ‘question-begging formulation’, he ultimately still relies on the reader’s intuition about what is accepted as a historical fact. This does not resolve any questions; it merely shifts them. The question is no longer *what* the historical facts are, but *whose* facts they are. In the light of Foucault’s critique of a unified history, it is undesirable to base a theoretical concept on a unified, even ‘official’, record of history. Therefore, the ‘official’ record in the formulation of the first constraint should be substituted by ‘any historical record or recollection’. Otherwise, all minority themes are banned to the ‘dark’ areas of history. The second constraint states that “the logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality” (McHale 1987: 88).

The fictional-real ontology of *Kavalier & Clay* sticks to these constraints; it does not contradict the reader’s reality, but it does fill in the blanks *ad libitum*. Moreover, seeing as the fictional real is only separated from the other ontologies by a semipermeable membrane, the fictional-real ontology is a target for mythification. Characters and objects with a transworld identity can be subject to mythification as long as the text either carefully selects information from the ‘official’ record of history—highlighting extraordinary, yet real, events, characteristics, accomplishments etc.—or resorts to the ‘dark’ areas of history. Respective examples are Houdini’s escape tricks, which were really performed, and Dalí’s appearance at the New York party, which might have happened. These real or possible people, places or events are thus mythified. Through these strategies of selection and exploitation of ‘dark’ areas, the verisimilitude of the fictional-real ontology is undermined.

This fictional-real ontology is the ontology of Sam Klayman, Rosa Luxembourg Saks and many others. It comprises the world ‘normal’ characters believe in. It is the basic, realistic ontology that seems plausible to the reader as it mimics his or her ontology. The fictional-real ontology is, however, penetrated by at least two other ontologies, namely the Jewish and the comic-book, and the point of intersection of these three ontologies is the character of Josef Kavalier. Josef, or Joe, is the only character that has a part in all three ontologies. He is part of the fictional real as he fights the Nazis and marries Rosa; he is part of the Jewish ontology as he gets involved in the mission to transport the Golem to a secure location; and he is the creator of the comic-book ontologies surrounding the characters the Escapist and Luna Moth.

The Jewish ontology describes a world that differs from ours in that it contains magical elements, the most prominent example in *Kavalier & Clay* being the Golem of Prague. The Golem is a mythical creature made of mud that is brought to life by a rabbi, much like the monster that was created by Doctor Frankenstein. Indeed it seems that the Golem is the Jewish equivalent of a theme that is key to any religion and as old as mankind itself, namely the creation of life and the manipulation of death. In Jewish religion it is believed that a number of powerful rabbis were capable of creating a Golem through enchantments and prayer. This theme conflicts with the atheistic and amychical character of our contemporary, and the fictional-real, ontology. In Lyotard’s words, the status of discursive and narrative knowledge—although the primary mode of capturing and conveying knowledge—is in decline in favour of objective, scientific knowledge, which is ranked higher in the social epistemological hierarchy. Within the Jewish ontology of *Kavalier & Clay*, however, a different epistemology applies.

Every universe, our own included, begins in conversation. Every golem in the history of the world, from Rabbi Hanina’s delectable goat to the river-clay Frankenstein of Rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel, was summoned into existence through language [...]. (Chabon 2000: 119)

It is clear that the power of narrative and discourse is an important theme in *Kavalier & Clay*. The Golem is not merely a metaphor for creation, the act of breathing life into something, be it a pile of clay or a string of words, but it also is an actual character. As such, the Golem itself has been brought to life through the power of the word and enters the fictional real.⁸

In *Kavalier & Clay* the Golem, though no longer alive, is transported from Prague to an American suburb, and its security is a matter of life and death. Initially, the Golem is only present through the story of Josef's childhood.⁹ At the end of the novel, however, Rosa and Sam are baffled when a box filled with mud ends up on their doorstep. This ontological breach is problematic as up to that point Golems had no part in their ontology. Seeing as the fictional real resembles the reader's ontology, this transgression is difficult to process for the reader. To problematise this event even further it is not the anthropomorphic Golem that turns up on Rosa and Sam's doorstep, but rather a box of mud, with stickers from all over the world. In McHale's terminology an ontological flicker is created as every attempt at interpretation hesitates between two or more ontologies. Moreover, by entering the fictional-real ontology, the Golem is demythified; it loses its mythical status, blurring the boundary between the fictional real and the Jewish ontology even further.

It is also remarkable that Josef's life story is modelled after the motif of the wandering Jew. Forced to leave his family behind, Josef leaves his home and travels the world, all the while trying to reunite his family and to find a new place to call home. It seems almost as if Josef Kavalier has been torn from his world and placed in another, which leads me to propose that the different ontologies can be linked to specific chronotopes. In an almost neo-structuralist analysis the ontological boundaries of the novel are reflected in a dichotomy between old Europe and modern America. Old Europe is a chronotope in which the religious, the magical and the mythical are valued more than the scientific; in which ethical, aesthetic and narrative knowledge are epistemologically superior. It is the other-world. Modern America on the other hand is a chronotope that is characterised by its similarity with the contemporary reader's mode of thought. It is a selection of the fictional-real universe. Josef Kavalier has travelled from old Europe to modern America, where he became Joe Kavalier, almost as if adopting an alter ego. Next to this dichotomy there are other 'ex-centric' places, which are imbued with magical qualities, such as the Empire State Building, the Rathole and Tannen's magic shop. These re-interpretations of the *locus amoenus* can be found in every universe of *Kavalier & Clay*.

Besides being breached by the Jewish ontology, the fictional real is also penetrated by the comic-book ontology.¹⁰ Sam Clay and Joe Kavalier work together to create a comic-book universe. The status of this universe is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be argued that this universe is subordinate to the fictional real, as it is created by a character of the fictional real universe. In Eco's terminology this would mean that the Escapist's universe is a subworld. On the other hand, the story of the Escapist is presented in separate chapters that are not directly linked to the fictional real, making it possible that the Escapist's universe is juxtaposed to the fictional real. Disregarding the hierarchical position of the comic-book ontology, it is clear that—similar to the Jewish ontology—it is characterised by an other-worldly attitude towards

⁸ Although the myths surrounding the golem contradict each other, a lot of them agree on the fact that the Golem is ultimately brought to life through the power of the word, either by inscribing words on his forehead or by chanting prayers.

⁹ There is another link between Josef Kavalier and the Golem. The Golem that was brought to life by rabbi Juddah Loew ben Bezalel in order to protect the city was also called Josef.

¹⁰ I am referring to the comic-book ontology as if it is a monolithic ontology. In reality, however, the comic-book universe is made up out of a myriad of universes that overlap and intersect but are ultimately independent. In order to simplify things, and because our discussion is mainly centered on one universe of the comic-book ontology, namely that of the Escapist, I sometimes may refer to the Escapist's universe as the comic-book universe.

the magical. Unlike the Jewish ontology, however, the comic-book universe is created by characters. This does not have to mean that they have created it from scratch; they had all kinds of sources to borrow from. Note that, as I have mentioned above, Eco thought that there is always a degree of overlap. By copying, transforming and manipulating other ontologies Kavalier and Clay create their own ontology. In a way they fit Lévi-Strauss's description of the 'bricoleur' (1966).

One of the most important characters to populate the comic-book universe is Tom Mayflower. He and his alter ego, the Escapist, a champion of the free world who comes "to the aid of those who languish in tyranny's chains" (Chabon 2000: 12), is based on Josef's teacher Bernard Kornblum, who exists in the fictional real; the real-life escape artist Harry Houdini, who has a transworld identity; and to some extent Josef Kavalier himself. In a way Joe Kavalier is the Escapist, as the Escapist's persona is made up of what Sam refers to as "wishful figments. [...] [W]hat some little kid *wishes* he could do" (ibid: 145, original emphasis). The Escapist is a projection of Josef's desire to free the oppressed, and more specifically his family. He wishes to realise his objective so badly that he risks losing track of the ontological boundary.

Over the course of the last week, in the guise of the Escapist, Master of Elusion, Joe had flown to Europe [...] [I]n a transcendent moment in the history of wishful figments, the Escapist had captured Adolf Hitler and dragged him before a world tribunal. [...] The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free. (ibid: 165-166)

When he looks up from his desk he feels "contented and hopeful" (ibid: 166), and the odour he smells is "the smell of victory" (ibid: 165). At that point Joe is mixing the fictional real with his own creation. Joe battles the Nazis by creating a parallel universe in which a war is being waged between representatives of the League of the Golden Key and the Iron Chain, two ancient secret organisations that have been battling each other throughout history. The war between the Allies and the Axis that is being fought in the fictional real is borrowed, transformed and incorporated into the comic-book universe. Such a strategy is by no means restricted to this novel or this author.¹¹ It can also be detected in the works of other postmodern authors, most notably Thomas Pynchon. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, history is reinterpreted in terms of a conflict between two rival mail-distribution companies, 'Thurn und Taxis' and 'Tristero'. What this strategy achieves is the creation of both epistemological and ontological doubt: epistemological because it makes the reader reconsider the notion of history and historiography, ontological because readers have to choose between what they thought was true and what is now presented to them as true. There is an ontological flicker between two contrasting ontologies.

At first, the parallels between the fictional real and the Escapist's reality are thinly veiled—for example, the Escapist is fighting the *Razis* in Europe—but this veil is quickly dropped, an act which is met only lukewarmly by Anapol, Joe and Sammy's publisher: "We're calling them *Germans* now?" (Chabon 2000: 170, original emphasis). Joe pushes political aspiration so far as to create a comic-book cover portraying the Escapist hitting Hitler in the face.

This dropping of the veil is symbolic because it shows the motivation of everybody involved in the act of creation. For Anapol, the Escapist's world has to appeal to a broad audience and thus eschew controversy. For Sam and especially Joe, the politics outweighs the economics. It is their way to contribute to the war. They have created characters that possess the power to defeat evil, a power they do not have themselves. Or do they? The episodes of the Escapist that are created by Joe and Sam function as propaganda. In other words, the Escapist

¹¹ McHale refers to this postmodern phenomenon as the creation of a "secret history" (1987: 91).

enables them to influence two universes in one go. The idea of comics as propaganda is, however, not an invention of the fictional real, existing as it has, and does, in the reader's reality. The publication of the cover of the *Escapist* hitting Hitler is an event that has been borrowed and transformed from the reader's reality,¹² for the very first cover of *Captain America*, who was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, two Jewish cartoonists, depicted their hero beating up Hitler (Strömberg 2010: 42–43). Again, this is an example of the crossing of ontological boundaries by using events that took place in the reader's universe and creating a copy in the fictional real.

Kavalier and Clay are, however, quickly forced to choose: either they have to abandon their commitment to a political comic-book universe, an act for which they would be handsomely rewarded, or they lose their jobs and thus the opportunity to create *The Escapist's* universe altogether. The money that Joe would earn would finance his brother's escape attempt. Together with their editor, George Deasey, they find a way out of their conundrum, but if they had not, they would have been fired, because Joe is unable to 'lay off' the Germans.

And that was the problem, Joe thought. Giving in to Anapol and Ashkenazy would mean admitting that everything he had done until now had been, in Deasey's phrase, powerless and useless. [...] No, he thought. Regardless of what Deasey says, I believe in the power of my imagination. [...] "Yes, god damn it, I want the money," Joe said. "But I can't stop fighting now." (Chabon 2000: 286)

If Deasey had not helped them, Joe would sooner have quit his job than succumbed to Anapol and Ashkenazy, even if it would provide the money he needed to get his brother out of Prague. Joe does not want to give in, because the universe he has created has grown to such an extent that it rivals the fictional real. The ontological flicker has become so strong that it determines the actions undertaken by characters in the fictional real. It does not take long, however, for Joe himself to start questioning the political use of his comic-book war.

[T]he sad futility of the struggle [...] seemed to have begun to overtake the ingenuity of his pen. Month after month, the *Escapist* ground the armies of evil into paste, and yet here they were in the spring of 1941 and Adolf Hitler's empire was more extensive than Bonaparte's. [...] Though Joe kept fighting, Rosa could see that his heart had gone out of mayhem. (ibid: 318)

The *Escapist's* power does not influence the fictional real to such an extent that it enables Joe to end the fictional-real war at once. So Joe directs his attention to the poetics of the comic-book universe, rather than the politics. He becomes concerned with the representational nature of the subworlds he has created. Joe Kavalier's poetics can be divided into at least three stadia: conventional linear poetics, surrealist poetics and modernist poetics.

Josef Kavalier relied on conventional linear poetics for his politically orientated *Escapist* comics, but gradually turned to the surrealist poetics à la Winsor McKay, to which he was introduced by Rosa's father, as his political aspirations faded.

Suddenly the standard three tiers of quadrangular panels became a prison from which he had to escape. They hampered his efforts to convey the dislocated and non-Euclidian dream spaces in which Luna Moth fought. He sliced up his panels, stretched and distorted them, cut them into wedges and strips. He experimented with benday dots, cross-hatching, woodcut effects, and even crude collage. (ibid: 319)

¹² A myriad of examples could be given of real events that were borrowed from the reader's universe and incorporated in *Kavalier & Clay*. One other notable example is the publication of Fredric Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent Senate hearing (see Strömberg 2010: 90–91). Both events occurred both in the reader's and the fictional-real universe. In the fictional real, however, this real event is mixed with fictional elements as Sam Clay's testimony never took place in the reader's universe (Chabon 2000: 613–616). Moreover, it is ironic that Sam Clay does not have to account for his real homosexuality, but has to motivate the alleged homosexual relationship between the comic-book characters he created.

Joe's turn to surrealism is partially fuelled by the critique that realism cannot capture reality. The conventions have to be broken and a new language has to be created, a language that has the power of expression. In his depiction of Luna Moth's universe—centred on Luna Moth, a comic-book heroine based on Rosa—Joe develops a surrealist style. It is not until he watches Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, though, that Joe realises that he had not yet fully laid bare the genre's potential.

It was not just a matter, he told Sammy, of somehow adapting the bag of cinematic tricks so boldly displayed in the movie—extreme close-ups, odd angles, quirky arrangements of foreground and background; Joe and a few others had been dabbling with this sort of thing for some time. It was that *Citizen Kane* represented, more than any other movie Joe had ever seen, the total blending of narration and image that was—didn't Sammy see it?—the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling, and the irreducible nut of their partnership. (ibid: 362)

Joe wants to create a 'total blend of narration and image'. And when he finally has a shot at achieving this through a project Sam and Joe have titled *Kane Street*, he completely abandons the political aspects of the Escapist (ibid: 366). Joe had already let go of the conventional comic-book poetics with the creation of Luna Moth, but he only creates a complete blend of narration and image, of content and form, in *Kane Street*. The purest form of this kind of blend, however, is probably Joe's *The Golem!*. This graphic novel tells the "long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it" (ibid: 577). Through *The Golem!* Joe grants himself a transworld identity; he creates yet another fictional universe, but this time he is at the centre of it, he himself the unfortunate hero. Equally noteworthy is the form of Joe's *The Golem!*:

There were no balloons in any of the panels, no words at all except for those that appeared as part of the artwork itself [...] and the two words *The Golem!* (ibid: 578)

The Golem! is not narrated through language, but through the sole use of images. Besides the absence of words, little information is shared about the pictorial language that Joe develops. We do know, however, that the end product is startling. Joe has crafted a tool that is so apt at telling a story that he is afraid to share his own, painful life story.

[T]he more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression—the less willingness he felt to show it to other people, to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution. (ibid: 579)

The project that Josef Kavalier undertakes with *The Golem!* is similar to Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay* in that Chabon's novel also is a complete blend of content and form, and in that both texts show an understanding and exploration of the limits of their material. In contrast to the essentially modernist project of Josef Kavalier, however, stands the elaborate metalevel of Chabon's text. Whereas *The Golem!* is Josef's autobiographical graphic novel, *Kavalier & Clay* is as much a novel about the business of creating worlds, both real and fictional, and about language and its limits, as it is the story of Joe, Sam and so many others.

The different ontological levels of *Kavalier & Clay* are so intricately intertwined that form and content are indistinguishable; politics and poetics form a coherent unity. To get an idea of the dazzling complexity and obfuscation of the ontological landscape one only needs to consider the entity of the Golem. The Golem—metaphor, creation and character at the same time—occurs in every universe. He is transported from old Prague to modern America, from the religious to the fictional real (and is thus demythified), from where he is yet again transformed to fit into another subworld, that of Joe's graphic novel. In this last universe, however, the Golem appears in the person of a little boy, who is a (re)mythified copy of the

young Josef Kavalier. This dizzying complexity illustrates one last difference between *The Golem!* and *Kavalier & Clay*; whereas *The Golem!* ultimately succeeds in mustering a suitable language to narrate experiences and events, *Kavalier & Clay* has to work with the imperfect tools at hand.

Conclusion

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay is a novel that sets out to explore the boundaries of language and of the novel. What can a novel portray or express? Is it capable of representing history? And what are the possibilities of the fantastic novel? Chabon's novel does—as postmodern texts often do—ask more questions than it answers. *Kavalier & Clay* succeeds in showing that all novels are essentially totalisations. It reveals that all narratives employ totalising techniques. Therefore, the term historiographic metafiction suits the novel well. It casts the past in a compelling narrative that never aspires to 'Truth'. On the contrary, *Kavalier & Clay* incorporates an extensive metalevel that destabilises every attempt on behalf of the reader to interpret it as a totalising narrative.

Kavalier & Clay not only questions the boundaries of language and literature, but also those of our universe and our view or description of that universe, thereby disrupting the suspension of disbelief even more. I have shown that the ontologies that constitute the ontological landscape of *Kavalier & Clay* cannot easily be distinguished from each other as they interact and create ontological ambiguities. Therefore, *Kavalier & Clay* can be read as a fantastic novel that resists interpretation.

Especially the combination of mythification and demythification causes ontological doubt as 'the world as we know it' is negated. The laws governing one universe are applied in another and the existence of people and the occurrence of events are manipulated. Yet it is impossible to put one's finger on the exact transgression, as these destabilising techniques operate in the 'dark' areas of the collective consciousness of the past. This ontological ambiguity is cleverly exploited to express what is perhaps the main theme of the novel, namely escapism. To suspend, even if it is only for a short period of time, your belief and disbelief; to let go of what you believe and to believe what you did not deem possible.

Kavalier & Clay 'escapes' the boundaries of language, literature and our universe. Through the narrative of the Escapist's origin, the true nature of the book is revealed. The core of the novel is shaped by an essential metafictional theme, namely escapism, which is at the same time the 'real' theme in Josef's 'real' life within the 'reality' of the text's 'real' ontology. This sense of escapism is further strengthened by the incorporation of a Jewish and a comic-book ontology. By mixing these ontologies the novel takes a stand in the ongoing epistemological struggle. It 'promotes' ontologies that prefer narrative over scientific knowledge by creating fundamental ontological doubt. Ontological doubt is directly opposed to the reader's empiricist, objective and scientifically orientated world, which values truth more than beauty and moral good.

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